

THE SYRIAN CHURCHES SERIES

EDITED BY : JACOB VELLIAN

VOLUME THIRTEEN

**STUDIES IN SYRIAC
SPIRITUALITY**

S. P. BROCK

ܣܬܐ ܒܪܬܐ

ܡܠܟܝܢ ܕܥܝܪܐ ܕܐܢܬܝܢ ܕܥܝܪܐ ܕܥܝܪܐ

Ex Libris

Beth Haddutho Library

The Malphono George Anton Kiraz Collection

ܣܬܐ ܒܪܬܐ ܕܥܝܪܐ ܕܥܝܪܐ ܕܥܝܪܐ
ܕܥܝܪܐ ܕܥܝܪܐ ܕܥܝܪܐ ܕܥܝܪܐ ܕܥܝܪܐ
ܕܥܝܪܐ ܕܥܝܪܐ ܕܥܝܪܐ ܕܥܝܪܐ ܕܥܝܪܐ
ܕܥܝܪܐ ܕܥܝܪܐ ܕܥܝܪܐ ܕܥܝܪܐ ܕܥܝܪܐ
ܕܥܝܪܐ ܕܥܝܪܐ ܕܥܝܪܐ ܕܥܝܪܐ ܕܥܝܪܐ

Anyone who asks for this volume, to read, collate, or copy from it, and who appropriates it to himself or herself, or cuts anything out of it, should realize that (s)he will have to give answer before God's awesome tribunal as if (s)he had robbed a sanctuary. Let such a person be held anathema and receive no forgiveness until the book is returned. So be it, Amen! And anyone who removes these anathemas, digitally or otherwise, shall himself receive them in double.

THE SYRIAN CHURCHES SERIES

EDITED BY : JOCOB VELLIAN

VOLUME THIRTEEN

**STUDIES IN SYRIAC
SPIRITUALITY**

S. P. BROCK

All Rights Reserved to the Editor

1988

PRINTED AT ANITA PRINTRS, POONA-411 014

P R E F A C E

In the past there has been a tendency to see just two main strands in the history of Christian tradition, the 'Greek East' and 'Latin West'. Such a view lamentably neglects a third very important component of Christian tradition, which we may call the 'Syriac Orient'.

There are two fundamental reasons why the Syriac Orient is of significance — not just to the Churches of Syriac liturgical tradition, but for the entire Christian tradition.

In the first place, Syriac Christianity is rooted in the Semitic world out of which the Bible and Christianity sprang. The Lord's Prayer as recited in Syriac today would not be all that different from the wording in Galilean Aramaic which Christ himself will have used. But more important, the imagery and thought-patterns used, especially by earlier Syriac writers, have their roots directly in the cultural milieu of the biblical writers.

Secondly, Syriac Christianity represents a Christian tradition which has been Asian from its very beginnings. This fact becomes even more significant when we link this consideration with our first point. Since Syriac Christianity itself came under the increasing influence of Greek-speaking Christianity from the fifth century onwards, the earlier writers — and above all the great theologian-poet St Ephrem (died 373) — take on particular significance, for they represent a tradition of Christianity which is still, in its essence, unhellenized, that is to say, un-europeanized. This means that early Syriac Christianity takes on today great interest, since it proves to be the most important witness to an indigenous Asian Christian tradition which is free from the European cultural and philosophical trappings of the other Christian traditions. And for the ordinary Christian it offers a Christian vision which is at the same time profound, fresh, and exciting.

In the following chapters I have tried to draw out some of the aspects of this Syriac tradition which seem to me to be of considerable relevance today. The first five chapters deal with specific themes, while the remaining ones provide a few glimpses into the more important Syriac Fathers and their writings.

The majority of the chapters reprinted here originated as talks given in England at the annual conferences of the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius. The aim of this Fellowship (based in London, but with branches elsewhere in Great Britain, Europe and North America) is to foster understanding between the Eastern and Western Christian traditions, and the papers collected here were originally meant to introduce western Christians

to the rich traditions of the Syriac Churches. (Inevitably this has meant there is sometimes some overlap between chapters). Since books in English on the Syriac tradition and designed for the general reader are few and far between, my hope is that this collection of articles, reprinted in Kerala, will help Indian Christians to deepen their appreciation of the rich Syriac spiritual heritage which is such an integral part of Indian Christianity.

I take the opportunity to express my warm thanks to the Reverend Dr. Jacob Vellian for his kindness in inviting me to put together this collection, and for seeing to its printing and publication.

OXFORD, ENGLAND

CONTENTS

Preface

1. World and Sacrament in the writings of the Syriac Fathers	1—12
2. The priesthood of the baptised : some Syriac perspectives.	13—20
3. The thrice-holy hymn in the Liturgy.	21—29
4. Mary and the Eucharist : an oriental perspective.	30—40
5. The Prayer of the Heart in Syriac tradition.	41—52
6. The poet as theologian : St Ephrem.	53—61
7. The Mysteries hidden in the side of Christ.	62—72
8. Jacob of Serugh on the Veil of Moses.	73—89
9. Dialogue hymns of the Syriac Churches.	90—98
10. St Isaac of Nineveh and Syriac spirituality.	99—108
11. St Isaac of Nineveh : some newly-discovered works.	109—113
12. St Isaac of Nineveh (St Isaac the Syrian).	114—124

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

These articles are reprinted by kind permission of the editors of Sobornost and Sourozh and of the Trustees of the Eastern Churches Review Trust. The original places of publication are as follows :

- ch. 1 — Sobornost VI; 10 (1974), pp. 685—96.
- ch. 2 — Sobornost/Eastern Churches Review 9:2 (1987), pp. 14—22.
- ch. 3 — Sobornost/Eastern Churches Review 7:2 (1985), pp. 24—34.
- ch. 4 — Sobornost/Eastern Churches Review 1:2 (1979), pp. 50—59.
- ch. 5 — Sobornost/Eastern Churches Review 4:2 (1982), pp. 131—42.
- ch. 6 — Sobornost VII:4 (1977), pp. 243—50.
- ch. 7 — Sobornost VII:6 (1978), pp. 462—72.
- ch. 8 — Sobornost/Eastern Churches Review 3:1 (1981), pp. 70—85
- ch. 9 — Sobornost/Eastern Churches Review 5:2 (1983), pp. 35—45.
- ch. 10 — Sobornost VII:2 (1975), pp. 79—89.
- ch. 11 — Sobornost/Eastern Churches Review 8:1 (1986), pp. 28—33.
- ch. 12 — Sourozh (1988).

WORLD AND SACRAMENT IN THE WRITINGS OF THE SYRIAC FATHERS

Throughout the history of Christianity one of the constant temptations for Christians has been to dismiss the world as essentially evil; on the level of the microcosm of man this is the mentality which views the body as a tomb — the famous Platonic *Soma-Sema*.

This sort of outlook has found its expression, not only in dualistic opinions about creation, with the world seen as the work of an inferior divine being other than the supreme God, but also in those doctrines of the Incarnation which hold Christ to be something other than the perfect union of God and man. “Born of the Holy spirit and the Virgin Mary”, as the Nicene Creed puts it — the perfect co-operation of Spirit and matter. To upset this delicate balance between the spiritual and the material world is all too easy, and an awareness of the tension between the two will belong to the common experience of every Christian.

In this paper I shall try to illustrate from the Syriac fathers something of the process of the sanctification of the world in the life of the Christian by means of the sacraments, baptism and the eucharist. Although the writer whom I shall mainly quote, St Ephrem, belongs to the fourth century, he speaks with a freshness and insight that seems as valuable today as it must have been to his contemporaries.

Like the Greek fathers, the Syriac fathers held a world view that saw the original creation as perfect, but subsequently spoilt by man's over-reaching and misuse, and ultimately restored to its original perfection by the work of Christ. All this was expressed in the familiar and convenient ‘mythic’ terms of Paradise, the Fall, and man's restoration to Paradise—by means, as we shall see, of baptism. The terms of the Genesis narrative provide a convenient ‘myth’ (in the good sense of the word), or metaphorical means of expression by which to describe the origin of the manifestly ‘fallen’ state of man in the world. The Greek and Syriac fathers did not read Genesis as if it was a historical document (as modern fundamentalists often do), and St Ephrem in particular is careful to stress the purely metaphorical nature of this sort of language, which is simply used for convenience, in order to describe what is essentially beyond the bounds of precise human comprehension. Here, for example, is how he puts it in one of his Hymns on Paradise¹ :

If some one concentrate his attention solely
on the metaphors used of God's majesty.
he abuses and misrepresents that majesty

by means of those metaphors with which God clothed himself for man's own benefit,

and he is ungrateful to that Grace
which bent down its stature to the level of man's childishness :
although God had nothing in common with it,
he clothed himself in the likeness of man.
in order to bring man to the likeness of himself.

Do not let your intellect be disturbed by mere names,
for paradise has simply clothed itself in terms that are familiar to you :
it is not because it is poor that it has put on your imagery.
rather your nature is far too weak to be able
to attain to its greatness, and its beauties are much diminished
by being depicted in the pale colours that you are familiar with.

(Hymns on Paradise. XI. 6 7).

In St. Joens Gospel Jesus points out that the double testimony required by Jewish law is provided by him self and his father (John 8 : 17). In another of his Hymns on Paradise Ephrem states that God has in fact already provided man with a similar double witness to himself, namely the Scriptures and the World :

In his book Moses
described the creation of the natural world,
so that both the natural work and his book
might testify to the Creator :
the natural world, through man's use of it.
the Book, through his reading of it.

These are witness which
reach everywhere ;
they are to be found at all times,
present at every hour,
rebuking the unbeliever
who denies the Creator.

(Hymns on Paradise. V, 2).

Time and time again, Ephrem sets the World alongside the Bible as a co-witness to God, urging man on to belief in the Creator.² The method of witness of both of them is essential by means of symbols and types— innumerable veiled pointers to God's hiddenness. They are the means of God's revelation of himself to man, a revelation which in one sense culminates in the Incarnation, but in another awaits its final fulfilment until the Second Coming—an ambivalence between the temporal and the eschatological that is recurrent, especially in early Christian thought.

Absolutely central to a proper Christian understanding of the world is the sacrament of baptism. Given the sad impoverishment in symbolic content of most modern baptismal services, this may on the surface seem a surprising statement, although I hope on reflection that it will no longer be so. St Ephrem and the Syriac fathers, like their Greek contemporaries, have

a great deal to say about the significance of baptism, but the essential of it all is that baptism is the re-entry, for each individual Christian who is baptized, into Paradise.³ It effects for her or for him the transformation, by means of the Holy Spirit, of fallen creation into its pristine paradisiacal state. In other words, the new-born Christian is raised to a plane where, provided he allows the Spirit to do so, the holy spirit will bring about the sanctification of the material world around him.

This mysterious truth, the Christian's re-entry into Paradise at baptism, is expressed in a whole number of different ways in the Syriac liturgical texts, and I shall only dwell on some of the most important. Perhaps most significant from our point of view is the imagery of baptism as a 'new creation'; the Christian is not simply 'born anew' in the 'spiritual womb' of the baptismal water, but this rebirth is put into relationship with the original creation of the world. This comes out very clearly in the course of the Maronite prayer of consecration of the baptismal water — a prayer that is certainly of great antiquity :

Instead of the womb of Eve which produced children who were mortal and corruptible, may this womb of water produce children who are heavenly, spiritual and immortal; and as the Holy Spirit hovered over the water at the establishment of created things, do you, Lord, be present in this baptismal water which is the Spiritual womb that gives birth to spiritual beings : and may it produce, instead of the Adam made of dust the heavenly Adam, and may those who are baptized in it receive in you lasting changes that will not be made ineffective : instead of corporeality, spirituality; instead of visible-ness, communion with the invisible; instead of the weak soul, your Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit who consecrates the baptismal water here is the same Holy Spirit who hovered over the waters of the primordial deep at creation (Genesis 1 : 2).⁴ Water is an ambiguous symbol : it can bring either death or life. In baptism both these elements are present, and the Holy Spirit effects the passage from death to life — the life of paradise, of the heavenly Adam

Another common way of expressing this restoration to Paradise is in terms of the entry into the Promised Land. The crossing of the Red Sea and of the River Jordan are commonly seen by the Syriac fathers as types of baptism. Thus for example the escape from bondage in Egypt represents for Ephrem the escape of the Christian in baptism from the domains of both Satan and Death.⁵ There is actually a deliberate ambivalence in the viewing of baptism as both the crossing of the Red Sea and that of the Jordan. According to the former picture, the Christian's life on earth corresponds to that of the Israelites in the wilderness, being fed on the spiritual food of the Eucharist — frequently described as manna; according to the latter, the Christian at once enters the promised land and partakes of the 'milk and honey'. Within this seeming contradiction in fact we have reflected the

mysterious conjunction of the temporal with the eschatological that takes place in the liturgy.

The baptized Christian is thus in the paradoxical position of having already entered Paradise by means of baptism, and yet, because he lives among people in many of whom Christ's work has not yet come to fruition, Paradise is not fully experienced. He has, however, in Paul's words, received the 'pledge' of what is to come.⁶ Put rather differently, in so far as the Christian has become aware, in the light of the Spirit, of what is the proper relationship of the created world to its Creator (Ephrem would say, a 'mirror' of God's glory) the Christian is already in Paradise, but in so far as the created world, through man's misuse of it, falls short of its true potential, the Christian, by his own awareness of what that potential is, so far has only a 'pledge' of what is to come.

For the Christian, the Eucharist, which provides the continual re-presentation of that event which made his baptismal rebirth possible, is the direct means by which this awareness is kept alive, fed by the Spirit. Thus Ephrem brings the Eucharist into specific relationship with these baptismal themes of 'entry into Paradise' and 'new creation':⁷

The spiritual bread lifts and makes of fly...
by means of this spiritual bread everyone becomes an eagle
which travels to Paradise,

(Hymns on Unleavened Bread, XVII, 9f)

And in another hymn :

When the Lord came down to earth to mortals
he created them a new creation; like the angels
he mingled fire and spirit in them
to make them fire and spirit within.

Ephrem continues later in the same hymn, addressing Christ directly :

See, Fire and Spirit in the womb that bore you;
See, Fire and Spirit in the river where you were baptized,
Fire and Spirit in our baptism,
in the Bread and the Cup, Fire and Holy Spirit.

(Hymns on Faith, X, 9 and 17).

If baptism is the re-entry into Paradise, then it follows logically that the Church itself is a symbol of Paradise. Thus we find that another prayer in the Maronite baptismal service specifically speaks of baptism as "bringing the baptized into glorious Paradise, that is, his faithful church".

It was the unanimous view of the Fathers that only the baptized, reborn as the 'sons of God' had the right to address God as 'Father' and use the Lord's prayer, basing themselves in this on pauline teaching (Romans 8:15). As 'sons of God' they are also now in a position to join the angelic

beings and praise God (the term ' sons of God ' in the Old Testament in fact often refers to angelic beings);⁸ and the praise of God is seen by Ephrem as an essential —indeed the prime — element in the life of a Christian. Thus he writes :

While I live will I give praise, and not be as if I had no existence;
I will give praise during my lifetime, and will not be a dead man
among the living.

(Hymns on Nisibis, L, 1).

In other words, praise is the true and proper expression of life.

This newly gained freedom to praise was frequently expressed in 'mythic' terms of the "robe of glory" or "robe of praise", with which Adam and Eve had, according to Jewish legend, being clothed in Paradise, but which they lost at the Fall. This robe, the "mantle of praise" as Isaiah 61:3 calls it, is regained by the Christian at baptism. Thus Jacob of Serugh, a poet of the last fifth century, puts it:

The robe of glory that was stolen away (sc. by Satan) among the tress
of Paradise

have I put on in the waters of baptism⁹

Likewise we find in a hymn attributed to Ephrem :

Instead of fig leaves, God has clothed men with glory in the baptismal
water.

(Hymns on Epiphany, XII, 4).

Praise of God is also seen as essentially a gift from God, and this comes out very beautifully in a Hymn of Ephrem's on the wedding feast at Cana (here compared to the Eucharist), which is worth quoting at some length:

I have invited you, Lord, to a wedding feast of song,
but the wine — the utterance of praise — at our feast has failed.
You are guest who filled the jars with good wine,
fill my mouth with your praise.

The wine that was in the jars was akin and related to
this eloquent wine that gives birth to praise,
seeing that wine gave birth to praise
from those who drank it and beheld the wonder.

You who are so just, if at a wedding feast not your own
you filled six jars with good wine,
do you, at this wedding feast, fill not the jars
but the ten thousand ears with its sweetness.

Jesus, you were invited to the wedding feast of others,
here is your own pure and fair wedding-feast : gladden your
rejuvenated people,

for your guests too, Lord need
your songs; let your harp utter.

The soul is your bride, the body your bridal chamber,
your guests are the senses and the thoughts.

And if a single body is a wedding feast for you,
how great is your banquet for the whole church !

(Hymns on Faith, XIV, 1-5).

The material world provides man with a parable : the earth is meant to be fertile and bring forth vegetation, and earth that is barren and fails to produce fruit disappoints the farmer who owns it : so man is primarily meant to bear the fruit of praise for his Creator, and someone who fails to do so is no better than a barren piece of earth.¹⁰ A Jewish rabbi, who was an older contemporary of Ephrem's, R. Hannina ben Papa, expressed the same thought vividly when he said " Whoever enjoys anything of this world without saying a benediction is as through he has robbed the Holy One." ¹¹ To Ephrem, Christ is himself the ' first sheaf ' (Leviticus 23:11) of the earth, offered to the Father.¹² It is in line with this way of thinking that the Eucharist is described as a ' sacrifice of praise '.

Ephrem often points out that the created world is continually urging man on to the praise of the Creator. In one hymn he takes the miraculous haul of fishes by the two boats in Luke 5 : 7 as an example : (the hymn is addressed to Christ).

The two boats are filled with parables,
symbolizing the hands and feet, ears and eyes,
showing how ears should be filled with truth at all times,
and eyes filled always with purity;
how the hands should hold your body,
and feet tread your house,
and how they should all be to your praise.

The sea has crowned you with the catch it offered you,
it twined together all kinds of fish, and offered them to you like flowers,
it filled the two boats full, as a symbol heaping them up;
the apostles' net, with the symbol of the 150 fishes,
resembles the harp of the prophets,
which wove the plaited crown
of the 150 psalms.

(Hymns on Virginity, XXXIII, 7:8).

Christ's presence, wheather by the lake of Gennesaret, or in the life of a Christian, brings about this miraculous transformation. Each flower bud that opens is no longer just a flower bud, but also a symbol of the resurrection.¹³ Everything in creation is clothed by the Holy Spirit with new meaning. We have in fact come back once more to Ephram's view of the world as a co-witness, with the Bible, to God the creator.

Thus the symbols in both the world and in the scriptures which initially led a person to baptism by no means lose their significance once he has become a Christian : rather their meaning becomes deeper, as in the constant process of illumination by the Holy Spirit. Ephrem delightfully describes how Scripture accompanies the Christian during his life on earth just as the travelling rock accompanied the Israelites in the wilderness (I Corinthians 10:4): to the non-Christian the rock may seem to be no more than simple rock, but for the baptized the Spirit causes rivers of water to flow from it—that is to say. He endows the scriptures with all sorts of new meanings :

I considered the world of the Creator,
 comparing it
 to the rock that marched
 with the people of Israel in the wilderness;
 it was not from stores of water
 contained within it
 that is poured out for them
 glorious streams :
 there was no water in it,
 yet oceans sprang forth from it.

(Hymns of Paradise; V, 1).

The 'rock' is the letter of scripture, lifeless in itself ; it is only the spirit who causes rivers of water to flow from it.

For the non-Christian Christ's symbols in both Creation and Scripture have in fact been veiled, but once baptized, and having re-entered Paradise, the Holy Spirit opens the eyes of faith of the Christian so that he can see these symbols unveiled and everywhere;¹⁴

In the Garden of Eden and the terrestrial world
 our Lord's symbols multiply themselves.
 Who can gather in all the pictures of his mystery ?
 In each one of them Christ is depicted in full.

Things visible await you, Lord; types seek you out, the symbols
 prefigure you,
 parables take their refuge in you.

(Hymns on Virginity, V, 8).

Elsewhere Ephrem speaks of Christ as 'the Lord of the symbols'.¹⁵ and the 'harbour' in which they all find their homecoming and rest.¹⁶

In the process of this homcoming, the meaning of the symbols, rather than being suppressed, is subsumed into Christ himself. Ephrem uses the analogy of the eucharist bread and wine, and the baptismal oil :

In the Bread we eat the power that cannot be eaten,
 in the Wine we drink the fire that cannot be drunk,
 we are anointed with the oil by the power that is beyond comprehension.

(Hymns on Faith. VI, 4).

The Bread, although it remains outwardly bread, has become, through the descent of the Holy Spirit, the body of Christ: the Wine, though it remains wine outwardly, has become the Blood of Christ's. So Christ symbols in the material world remain outwardly unchanged, but inwardly they have taken on, for the Christain, new and deeper meaning.

This relationship between symbols revealed in both the created world and in scripture, and their hidden reality in Christ is thus exactly paralleled by the relationship in the Eucharist between the unconsecrated bread and wine, described in the Maronite *prothesis* as still "symbols of Christ's Body and the Blood which flowed from his side",¹⁷ and their consecrated state, when, in the words of Anaphora of St. James¹⁸ through the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit they have *become* the redeeming Body and the Blood which sets free our souls and bodies, the Body and the Blood of our Lord God and Saviour Jesus Christ".

The Eucharist also expresses the proper relationship of the created world to the Creator: the bread and wine — 'fruit of the earth and work of human hands'¹⁹ — transformed by the Spirit into the saving Body and Blood of Christ. It is a paradigm of the transforming power of the Spirit, a power that is always available to the Christain in every situation. It is significant that in most oriental eucharistic liturgies the Epiklesis, the Invocation of the Holy Spirit, is followed immediately by the Great Intercession. The Epiklesis ask for the descent of the Spirit, not only on the gifts to consecrate them, but also on everyone present at the liturgy, and the ensuing Great Intercession can be seen as simply an extension of this request, whereby the Church lifts up all the needs of the world, in the faith that the Holy Spirit has the power to transform every one and everything and every situation.

But in order for the Spirit to work through the created world, He requires the co-operation of man—man with his 'ungrateful will', as Ephrem calls it.²⁰ This co-operation between the created world and the Spirit underlies a profound and tightly packed hymn on the baptismal oil (*meshha*), itself a symbol of Christ (*meshiha*). The opening verses stress that man is a denizen of two worlds, and that he must labour for both: his wordly labour is rewarded in October with the harvests and then the first rains after the long hot summer months, while his spiritual toil is rewarded in April, the month of Easter, the time when it was the custom of all baptisms to take place. These two kinds of toil are closely interrelated, for October with the olive harvest provides the oil for the baptismal anointing in April (in the early Syriac Church the two main components of the baptismal rite were an anointing followed by baptism in water). Ephrem goes on to point out, using examples drawn from the lives of Elijah and Elisha, how moral misconduct in the working of the land has serious consequences which can only be rectified by the effects of oil—miraculous cruses of oil in the cases of Elijah and Elisha, and the baptismal oil in the case of the Christian. The oil that was multiplied and then sold to save the widow's sons from debt bondage, in the miracle wrought through Elisha, provides Ephrem

with an obvious symbol of Christ's own work of redemption. Here is how Ephrem himself puts it :

Repentance and diligence are requisites for both worlds,
for working the land and diligent are needed, for spiritual toil the
repentant;

though the diligent may not become rich, his diligence stands by itself,
and though the penitent may still sin again, he belongs to those who
have conquered,

whereas the sluggards and sinners have clothed themselves in a name
that is utterly evil :

there is reproach for the idle, and reproof for the sinners.

October gives rest to the weary after the dust and dirt of the summer,
its rain washes, its dew anoints the trees and their fruit.

April gives rest to the fasters, it anoints, baptizes and clothes in white;
it cleanses off the dirt of sin from our souls.

October presses out of the oil for us, April multiplies mercies us;
in October fruit is gathered, in April sins forgiven.

Because Jezebel defrauded truth,²¹ the earth refused its products :
the womb of the earth held back, as a reproof, the seed that the farmers
had lent it,

the earth suffocated the seeds within itself, because its inhabitants had
deceitfully held back truth.

The earth, whose nature is to bear, became barren against her custom;
while the cruse and the horn of oil gave birth and bore fruit against
their nature.²²

The same prophet's voice that had deprived the earth²³ also caused
barren wombs to be fruitful.

The oil gave itself for sale in place of the orphans, to prevent their
being sold;²⁴

it acts as a pillar to the fatherless, having restrained the fate that had
tried to sever

the two brothers, like shoots, from the stock of freedom
and graft them on to the stock of slavery.²⁵

The price of the oil made an end to the bonds of debt that cried
out against the debtors;

it tore up the bonds that had come to deprive the mother of her sons.

Oil in its love, like Christ,²⁶ pays debts that are not its own;
the treasure that turned up of its own accord for the debtors in the
pottery vessel

is like the Treasure that also turned up for the gentiles in a body made from earth.

The oil became a slave for a time to free those enslaved to sin :
in both name and deed does the oil depict Christ.

(Hymns on Virginity VII, 1-3, 11-12).

Perhaps the key to Ephrem's understanding of the world as sacrament is the recurrent theme of ' wonder '. Ephrem is constantly amazed, not only at the wonder of the Incarnation and the Eucharist, but also at the wonder of the created world. There is a beautiful series of hymns ' On the Table ', where he dwells on the ' wonder ' of everyday food :

We too should wonder and give thanks,
that from the dry stalk of wheat there comes ample bread,
that from the vine stalk there flows wine,
that from each tree, all kinds of varied delights—
this too is a great wonder, as great as the miracle of Cana

(Hymns on the Table, III).²⁷

or in another passage :

My brothers, there lies a source of wonder in our bread,
a source of amazement in what we drink.
When the mouth outwardly makes taste of bread and wine,
let the heart inwardly stand in awe at the creation of bread and wine.

(Hymns on the Table, V).

There is a delightful story that illustrates this tradition of ' wonder ' in later Syriac monasticism, to be found in the sixth century collection of ' Lives of the Eastern Saints ' by the church historian John of Ephesus. John relates how he was staying at a certain monastery one day when a wandering monk, a ' stranger ' in the Syriac terminology, was entertained there to a meal. He ate so slowly and with such extreme deliberation, taking two bites to everyone else's two dozen, that John's curiosity was aroused; afterwards he questioned the visiting monk in private, and this is what he was told in reply :

I hope that God will not judge me for having opened my mouth over food which is derived from God's gift without stretching my thoughts to give praise for his bounty. I hope in his name that I shall not be condemned for having stretched forth my hand to my mouth without every time that I stretched it forth similarly stretching forth my tongue to praise and my mind to prayer on behalf of those who labour and sweat and toil to supply my need.²⁸

Such an attitude of wonder and praise renders all things holy. As I Timothy 4:4-5 says, ' Everything God made is good, and is meant to be gratefully used, not despised. The holiness or otherwise of a certain food, for instance, depends not on its nature, but on whether it is eaten thankfully

or not'. One could of course just as well substitute 'object' for 'food', and 'used' for 'eaten'. We find exactly the same thing in an eighth century dialogue between a stylite called Sergius and a Jew: 'For us Christians everything is clean through the love of our Lord Jesus Christ; we have nothing that is defiled'.²⁹

Ephrem's wonder at the created world is an fact intimately related to his sense of wonder at the whole economy of the Incarnation. This comes out beautifully in a passage from one of the Hymns on Virginity, where Ephrem points out that, just as Mary's perfect co-operation with the Holy Spirit results in the Incarnation, so Creation itself can for the Christian who allows himself to be guided by the Holy Spirit, give birth to symbols of Christ:

Creation traced the symbols of Christ: Mary fashioned his limbs;
It was many wombs that engendered the Only-begotten Son—
for his mother's womb gave birth to his humanity,
while creation gave symbolic birth to him.

(Hymns on Virginity, V, 6).

Mary is set very clearly here as fulfilling in a special way the role of creation as whole. Though Ephrem does not expressly say so, one could infer that the true end of every Christian, as part of creation, is to give birth to an incarnate image of Christ—The icon in which, indeed, he was born, and which the Spirit 'repaints' (to use the metaphor of another hymn from this collection)³⁰ with the oil of anointing at baptism.

NOTES

- 1 My translation of Ephrem's hymns are based on Dom E. Beck's editions in the Louvain corpus of Eastern Christian Writer (quoted by hymn number and stanza)
- 2 See especially *Hymns on Faith*, XXXV, 1; *Hymns against Heresies*, XXVIII, 11-12.
- 3 For this theme in the Greek Fathers, see J. Danielou, *From Shadows to Reality* (London, 1960) pp. 23-30.
- 4 Cf. "The Epiklesis in the Antiochene Baptismal Ordines", in *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 197 (1974), p. 208. A Latin translation of the Maronite service is to be found in H. Denzinger, *Ritus Orientalium* (Wurzburg, 1863), I, pp. 334-50.
- 5 E. g. *Hymns on Unleavened Bread*, III.
- 6 Ephesians 1:14.
- 7 Ephrem's main passages on the subject of the Eucharist can be found in French translation in F. Graffin, "L'Eucharistie chez saint Ephrem", in *Parole de l'Orient* (Kslik, Lebanon) 4 (1973), pp. 93-121.
- 8 For this aspect, see further "Early Syrian Asceticism," in *Numen* 20 (1973), p. 6ff.
- 9 Ed. P. Bedjan, I, p. 209.
- 10 *Hymns on Nisibis*, L, 1.
- 11 Babilonia Talmud, *Berakhoth*, VI, 1 (f. 35b).
- 12 *Hymns on Nativity*, IV, 32.
- 13 Cf. *Hymns on Unleavened Bread*, XI; *Hymns on the Crucifixion*, VII, 1-2.
- 14 This is the subject of a famous homily, "On Moses' veil", by Jacob of Serugh (died 521), translated in chapter 8, below.

- 15 *Hymns on 'Unleavened Bread* III, response; cp *Hymns on Virginity*, VI, 7.
- 16 Cp *Hymns on Virginity*, IV, 4 etc.
- 17 M. Hayek, *Liturgie Maronite* (Tours, 1964), p. 229.
- 18 F. E. Brightman, *Liturgies Eastern and Western* (Oxford, 1896), I, pp. 88-9.
- 19 Compare the phrase *karpoi theou/kyriou*, "fruits of God/the Lord", on Byzantine bread stamps : G. Galavaris, *Bread and the Liturgy* (Wisconsin, 1970), p. 46.
- 20 *Hymns on Faith*, XI, 9.
- 21 I Kings 21 : 5f.
- 22 I Kings 17 : 16.
- 23 I Kings 17 : 1.
- 24 II Kings 4 : 1-7.
- 25 Contrast Romans 11:17.
- 26 Colossians 2:14
- 27 Edited and translated by F. Graffin in *L'Orient Syrien* 4 (1959).
- 28 *Patrologia Orientalis* 17, . 255.
- 29 *Dispute of Sergius the Stylite* (ed. A. P. Hayman), XX, 7.
- 30 *Hymns on Virginity*, VII, 5.

THE PRIESTHOOD OF THE BAPTISED : SOME SYRIAC PERSPECTIVES

At the outset it is important to recall that the priesthood of the baptised applies to the entire People of God, *laos tou theou*, to both laity and the ordained priesthood. It is not the case that the laity exercise one priesthood and ordained priests another. Rather do all the faithful, lay and clergy, exercise a single common priesthood, in addition to which the ordained priest exercises a particular function within the community of the faithful. The relationship between the two priesthoods should be seen as one of complementarity, and not of rivalry.¹ But what is meant by the priesthood of the baptised ? How does it function ? In our quest for an answer to these questions we shall be looking here at the witness of oriental Christian — and in particular, early Syriac—tradition. For this tradition, by very reason of its unfamiliarity, can often cast some helpful light on issues usually considered solely on the basis of Latin and Greek Christian traditions.² Our discussions will fall into three sections : (1) The biblical basis, treating 1 Peter 2 : 9 as the key text, with its background in Exodus 19 : 6, (2) The way in which baptism is seen as conferring priesthood; and (3) How the People of God should be exercising the priestly function conferred upon them individually at baptism.

The biblical basis

Since there are some problems of interpretation and translation in 1 Peter 2, it will be helpful to have the three most important verses before us.³ It is very probable that the newly baptised are being addressed.

4. Come to him, to that living stone, rejected by men but in God's sight chosen and precious; 5. and like living stones, be yourselves, built into a spiritual house [*or* temple], to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. [Verses 6-8 quote Isaiah 28 : 16. Psalms 8 : 14-5 and 118 : 22 on the cornerstone]. 9. Now you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, so that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

We should notice especially the following points :

—The baptised are a 'royal priesthood' for a purpose, namely to declare God's wonderful deeds.

—They are to be built into a 'spiritual house'. The Greek word *oikos* ('house') could also, on the basis of Septuagint usage, be translated

‘temple’. This is found in several early translations of the New Testament, including the Syriac, which read ‘...and become spiritual temples and holy priests in order to offer up spiritual sacrifices’. Furthermore, the term ‘spiritual’ (*pneumatikos*) in this context is probably in the sense of ‘filled with the presence of the Spirit’.

—Most modern translations render *basileion hierateuma* as ‘royal priesthood’. But there is a good evidence that the phrase should be taken as two nouns, and not as noun and an adjective: ‘a kingdom (or, royal residence), a priestly body’ (compare Rev. 1:6). The Syriac translation offers another way of taking the phrase: ‘You are a chosen race who act as priests for the Kingdom’.

—The Greek phrase translated ‘royal priesthood’ is derived from the Greek (Septuagint) translation of Exodus 19:6, where the Hebrew has ‘a kingdom of priests’.⁴ The sense there is probably ‘a kingdom holy as priests’ that is, having a special relationship with God. We should in particular notice that the words occur in the context of the Covenant on Mount Sinai between God and Israel, and it is of significance that the phrase occurs in a conditional sentence: ‘if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant [...] you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation’. In other words, this is not something automatically conferred: it is conditional upon acceptance of the Covenant and its stipulations. In 1 Peter the condition is absent, but this is only because it is presupposed that the newly baptised have just committed themselves to the new Covenant. One could also say that the condition in Exodus has been rephrased in 1 Peter by means of the purpose clause, ‘so that you may declare...’ If this function of declaring the wonderful deeds of God is not carried out, then the baptised community, collectively or individually, cannot be described as a ‘royal priesthood’, or as the Syriac Bible expresses it, it is not ‘acting as a priest for God’s Kingdom’.

The ‘royal priesthood’, and baptism

The connection between the royal priesthood and baptism, implicit in 1 Peter, is made explicit in subsequent Christian tradition and is found uniformly in Latin, Greek and Syriac writers of the early Church. Only rarely, however, is this priesthood mentioned in the actual baptismal rites; presumably this silence was to obviate any misunderstanding and confusion between this priesthood and that of the ordained clergy. In the catechetical tradition, on the other hand, this aspect is quite frequently brought out. Thus, for example, the seventh-century Syrian Orthodox Patriarch John I writes as follows about the myron with which baptised are anointed:

With the imprint of this holy oil you are inscribed into the sonship of the heavenly Father; through the mark, or imprint, of this heavenly oil you become the sheep of Christ, a priestly kingdom, a holy people [...].⁵

The association with anointing is also found in the rare cases where the royal priesthood is referred to in actual baptismal rites. Thus we find in a

prayer before the postaptismal anointing in some baptismal rites in the liturgical tradition of the patriarchate of Antioch the following :

O God, whose gifts are very great, Father of our Lord and our Saviour Jesus Christ, who raises up to adoption by yourselves these people who are being filled with the scent of your Christ, of whom you have given a symbol in this myron which you are wont to sanctify through invisible power : grant through this imprint the union of your living and holy Spirit, and the honour of priesthood and the heavenly Kingdom to those who are sanctified [. . . .].⁹

Another element is sometimes introduced in connection with baptismal anointing. Referring to this anointing the fourth-century writer Aphrahat says, 'Christians are perfected as priests, kings and prophets'. Of course this is by no means confined to Syriac writers. It is found, for example, in the Latin rite for the consecration of the chrism on Maundy Thursday, where the prayer asks that the baptised who is anointed with it 'may receive the dignity of Kings, priests and prophets'. The reference to prophets does not occur in 1 Peter, but the triad of king, priest and prophet goes back to ancient Israelite practice where not only kings and priests were anointed but also prophets (see 1 Kings 19:16)

The mediating link between the Old Testament anointing and the baptismal anointing is of course the anointing of Christ (Christos and Messias/ Meshiha both mean 'anointed') at his baptism. Thus St Ephrem in the fourth century wrote :

The Spirit who rested on him at his baptism testified that he was the Shepherd [that is king, following Old Testament usage], and that he has received the roles of prophet and priest through John.⁷

Since Christ's baptism (linked with themes of his death and resurrection) constitutes the fountainhead of Christian baptism, what he received by right, we at our baptism, receive by grace.⁸

Syriac tradition adds a further dimension, using Adam/Christ typology. Christ the Second Adam is seen as restoring First Adam (that is humanity) to the state which existed before the Fall : 'Through the Second Adam who entered Paradise, everyone has entered it, for through the First Adam who left it, everyone left it' (Ephrem).⁹ According to the understanding of Ephrem and many Syriac writers, Adam and Eve in paradise were in an intermediary state. Obedience to God's command would have brought them immortality and made them not subject to corruption; disobedience, however, would (and did) bring them mortality and subjection to corruption. Baptism, on this understanding, puts us back potentially into this pre-Fall state where we too have the same choice ; listening to God leads to divine life, and disobedience or failure to listen results in death.

According to Jewish tradition, a tradition taken over in some parts of early Christian tradition, Adam in paradise was both king and priest. This is sometimes expressed by means of the imagery of the 'robe of glory/praise' with which Adam and Eve were clothed before the Fall, for this robe is, among other things, a priestly and royal robe. In Syriac tradition this imagery is taken up in order to describe the entire course of salvation history.¹⁰ In paradise, before the Fall, Adam and Eve are robed in glory; but at the Fall they are stripped of this and driven out of Paradise. Since the whole aim of the incarnation is to ensure the return of Adam and Eve (humanity) to paradise, God the Word 'puts on the body of Adam' at the incarnation; and at his baptism Christ, the Second Adam, places the robe of Glory in the river Jordan (the source of baptismal water) in readiness for Christians to put on at their baptism. At his or her baptism the Christians puts on this robe of glory in potential; its full reality will only be experienced at the resurrection—provided the robe is kept unsullied. Since this baptismal robe of glory is also, as we have seen, a royal and priestly robe, the clothing imagery neatly reinforces our basic theme, that baptism is the entry into a priestly role for all Christians.

The priestly function of the People of God

One of the basis functions of a priest in any religion is to make offerings to the divinity, and a precondition of this function is usually 'holiness' on the part of the priest (however 'holiness' is understood). The wording of 1 Peter 2:5 shows that these ideas of offering and holiness are likewise central in any understanding of the priestly function of all baptised Christians: 'Be built up into a temple that belongs to the Spirit, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God through Jesus Christ'.

How, then, in practical terms are the baptised supposed to exercise this priesthood? Two dimensions are to be discerned here, the communal and the individual (in connection with the former it should be noted that the Greek word *hierateuma* properly means a 'body of priests'). Both dimensions are of vital importance. We shall take the individual dimension first, and then examine how it relates to the communal dimension. This will provide an opportunity to see how the priestly role of all believers is related to, but quite distinct from, the additional role of the ordained priesthood.

Individual aspects of priesthood

In early Christianity and in the Judaism out of which it sprang there was widely current the idea that prayer is another kind of offering that can (and should) be made to God. Since offering and sacrifices require an altar upon which to present them to the deity, it was also necessary to locate an altar upon which this offering of prayer was to be made. Where was it? The Greek, Latin and Syriac Fathers all turned to Matthew 6:6 to find the answer; 'when you pray, go into your inner chamber and pray to your

Father who is in secret'. And they unanimously identify the 'inner chamber' as the heart—not the physical heart, but the heart in the biblical sense, as the centre of being (intellectual as well as emotional) of the entire human person. Thus one way in which we exercise our priestly role, conferred on us at baptism, is to offer up prayer on the altar of the heart. However the Old Testament has many description of offerings and sacrifices which God rejected. A fourth century treatise on prayer, by Aphrahat, stresses this aspect :¹¹ God is no more likely to accept an offering of prayer that is of second or third grade quality than he would a sacrificial animal that was scraggy, when much better specimens were available. Thus, if the offering of prayer is going to be accepted by God, it must be accompanied by purity of heart.¹²

The same Syriac writer also draws attention of Old Testament passages which describe how God's acceptance of a sacrifice was sometimes made visible in the form of the descent of divine fire which consumed the sacrifice. This descent of divine fire could then be seen as an image of the descent of the Holy Spirit upon an acceptable offering of prayer. This in turn takes us back again to 1 Peter 2 : 'offer up spiritual sacrifices'; that is sacrifices in which the Spirit participates, something made possible at our baptism, 'through Christ'. Incidentally, Aphrahat has a very wide definition of what constitutes prayer : he specifically includes the example of someone who gives a cup of water to a person in need.

If our priestly offering takes place on the altar of our heart, then it is easy to see the force of St. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 6:19. 'Your bodies are temples of the Lord, and Christ dwells in your inner person'. Accordingly our bodies are the temple and our hearts the altar where we should individually exercise our priestly function of offering up spiritual sacrifices to God—whether these be in the form of prayer in the normal sense, or in the form of actions which can be said to constitute prayer.

Many Syriac writers bring out the close analogies between this interior sacrifice and the Eucharist, and there are some wonderful passages on mystical prayer describing the descent of the Holy Spirit upon this interior altar of the heart and the transforming effect that this has. Thus Martyrius, writing in the seventh century, explains :

So, if the commencement of our prayer is wakeful and attentive, and we wet our cheeks with tears-stemming from the emotion of our hearts, then our prayer will be made perfect in accordance with God's wish; being without blemish, it will be accepted in his presence, and the Lord will be pleased with us and have delight in our offering. As he perceives the pleasing scent of our heart's pure fragrance, he will send the fire of his Spirit to consume our sacrifices and raise up our mind along with them in the flames to heaven. Then we shall behold the Lord, to our delight and not to our destruction, as the stillness of his revelation falls upon us and the hidden things of the knowledge of him will be portrayed in

us : our hearts will be given spiritual joy along with the hidden mysteries which I am unable to disclose in words to the simple. In this way we make our bodies a living, holy and acceptable sacrifice, one that pleases God in our rational service.¹³

Priesthood and its communal aspects

It is to the Eucharist that we need now to turn, as we examine the communal aspect of the priesthood of all believers. Here it is important to remember that at the Eucharist the Christian community as a whole is offering up the only perfect offering, the Body and Blood of Christ. It is not just the ordained priest who makes this offering. To say this is not to play down the importance of the role of the ordained priests, let alone to imply that his presence is redundant. Far from it, for it is the ordained priest who enables the Christian community to make this perfect offering. Without him exercising his ordained priesthood, the Christian community could not make the offering at all.

As the Eucharistic the Baptised Christian community as a whole is exercising its priestly role in different ways. Firstly, it makes the offering (the ordained priest enabling it to do so). Secondly, it partakes fully in consuming the offering or sacrifice (while in the Old Testament this was a right confined to priests).

How are the individual and communal aspects of this priestly role of the baptised related to each other? An interesting answer is provided by an anonymous Syriac work of about AD 400 on the spiritual life, called the Book of Steps (*Liber Graduum*). Its twelfth chapter entitled 'On the hidden and visible ministry of the Church, describes three different aspects of the Church : the visible Church, with its physical altar and with the sacraments, the hidden Church of the individual Christian, where 'the body becomes a hidden temple and the heart becomes a hidden altar for ministry in the Spirit', and the Church in heaven.¹⁴ While the visible Church was instituted by Christ and his apostles after the model of the heavenly Church, the interior hidden Church is something whose existence each individual Christian has to discover for him or herself in the course of becoming aware of the reality of the heavenly Church, after which the visible Church is modelled. The Christian life is envisaged as a path of discovery, progressing from the visible Church, with its ordained priesthood, through the hidden interior Church of the individual Christian, where the body is made into a temple and the heart is not only an altar but also 'acts as a priest inwardly', and then proceeding on to an awareness of the heavenly Church 'before whose altar the angels and all the saints minister, while Jesus acts as priest and effects the consecration'. The anonymous author goes on to emphasise that in these three Churches, visible, hidden and heavenly, it is the same Spirit who ministers. The three Churches are thus intimately linked with each other : the Church of the heart cannot function properly without the visible Church, and the relationship of the visible Church to the heavenly Church cannot be properly perceived without the hidden Church.

This hidden Church, for which the body is the temple and the heart both altar and priest, and where prayer is the offering, is thus again understood as having close associations with the Eucharist. To grow in the Christian life is to activate the priestly role given at baptism and to learn how to see the created world as a sacrament.

Both the Syriac and the Eastern Christian tradition in general see a close parallelism between the Eucharist and the incarnation, in other words, between the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the Eucharistic offerings and the coming of the Holy Spirit upon Mary. The effect in Mary's case was physical conception and birth-giving. The effect on the Christian who receives Communion was likewise sometimes seen as a spiritual conception and birth-giving of Christ. Thus an eighth-century Syriac writer, Joseph the Visionary, prays before communion :

May I receive you Christ, not into the stomach which belongs to the body's member's, but into the womb of my mind, so that you may be conceived there, as in the womb of the Virgin.¹⁵

If this is translated into the imagery of the threefold Church, it is possible to say that Joseph the Visionary is asking that, as a result of the descent of the Holy Spirit on to the offering on the altar of the visible Church (and Joseph's partaking of that consecrated offering), the Holy Spirit may descend also on to the altar of the hidden Church within himself, and that the effect of this descent of the Spirit may be similar in character to that of the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Mary—in other words, that it may result in a birthgiving. The implications of all this is that it is Mary who provides the model for the interior priestly function of the heart.¹⁶

Realisation and actualisation

We may draw the various strands together under three headings, (1) The priesthood of all believers is to be understood as a priestly role into which all baptised Christians are meant to grow. It is the realisation and actualisation of the full meaning of baptism. It is thus not an office conferred upon people at their baptism, and thus its character is unlike that of the ordained priesthood. (2) This priestly role which is intended for all baptised believers is something which is made manifest and begins to function only when the individual Christian grows in holiness (a quality perhaps best understood in this connection as a process of self-emptying and conformity to Christ own self-emptying, of which St Paul speaks in Philipians 2).¹⁷ Here again there is a sharp contrast with the ordained priesthood, where the function is not dependant on the holiness of the individual priest. (3) When the priesthood of the baptised is made manifest and starts to be activated and to function, then it results in the proclamation of God's wonderful works—a proclamation directed outwards from the Church towards the unbaptised world at large, a proclamation that is made by Christ—like example as much as by words. Here again there is a contrast with the ordained priesthood; whose sacramental function is directed within the Church, enabling all the faithful, clergy and lay alike, to exercise their

priestly role as baptised Christians, a role which, as we have just seen, is directed outside the Church. If we return to the imagery of Joseph the Visionary, this priestly role intended for all the baptised is realised when the individual Christian is enabled, through participation in the sacraments and through co-operation with the Holy Spirit, to conceive and give birth to Christ in spirit. This suggests that the enabling function of the ordained priesthood in the Church might profitably be conceived of as that of a spiritual midwife.

NOTES

1. For the complementary roles see P. J. Rosato, 'Priesthood of the baptized and priesthood of the ordained', *Gregorianum* 68 (1987), pp. 215-66.
2. P. Dabau, *Le sacerdoce royal des fideles dans la tradition ancienne et moderne* (Paris (1950)) provides a basic survey; also L. Ryan, 'Patristic teaching on the priesthood of the faithful', *Irish Theological Quarterly* 29 (1962), pp. 25-41.
3. Detailed discussion of 1 Peter 2 is given by J. H. Elliott, *The Elect and the Holy* (Supplements to *Novum Testamentum* 12, 1966).
4. In the Targum tradition Exodus 19 : 6 is understood as referring to three categories within Israelite society, kings, priests and holy people.
5. Unpublished treatise on the Myron, quoted in my *The Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition* (Syrian Churches Series 9, 1979), p. 59.
6. Prayer common to the Syrian Orthodox *ordo* attributed to Timothy of Alexandria and the Melkite *ordo* attributed to Basil, quoted in full in my *The Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition*, p. 58.
7. Ephrem, *Commentary on the Diatessaron* iv. 3.
8. Compare John Chrysostom, *Homilies on 2 Corinthians* : by baptism you too are made king, priest and prophet' (PG 61 : 417).
9. Ephrem, *Hymns on Unleavened Bread* xxvii. 10 (quoted in my *The Luminous Eye : the spiritual world vision of St Ephrem* (Rome 1985), pp. 78-9.
10. For details see my 'Clothing metaphors as a means of theological expression in Syriac tradition' in M. Schmidt (ed.), *Typus, Symbole, Allegorie bei den ostlichen Vatern und ihren Parallelen im Mittelalter* (Eichstatter Beitrage 4, 1982), pp. 11-38.
11. Aphrahat, *Demonstration* i : an English translation will be found in my *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer* (Kalamazoo 1987), ch. 1.
12. For this aspect see my 'The Prayer of the Heart in Syriac tradition', *Sobornost/ECR* 4 : 2 (1982), pp. 131-42, (chapter 5, below).
13. *Book of Perfection* 11.8.20: an English translation of the whole section is given in *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer*, ch. 11.
14. English translations of chapter 12 of the Book of Steps can be found in R. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom* (Cambridge 1975), pp. 263-9, and in my *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer*, ch. 3.
15. An English translation of the whole of Joseph's beautiful prayer is given in the Appendix to *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer*.
16. For this aspect, see my 'Mary and the Eucharist : an oriental perspective.', *Sobornost/ECR* 1 : 2 (1979), pp. 50-9.
17. For the importance of Phil. 2:7 in Syriac spirituality see the Introduction to my *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer* ; for its relevance to discussions of priesthood in general see Maggie Ross, *Priesthood and the Christian. Models of power and spiritual Maturity* (forthcoming).

3

THE THRICE-HOLY HYMN IN THE LITURGY

Let us, who here mystically represent the cherubim in singing the thrice-holy hymn to the life-giving Trinity, now lay aside every earthly care (...).

The biblical background

The 'trice-holy hymn', or Sanctus, has been a feature common to the eucharistic prayers of both East and West ever since the fourth century.¹ Like so many other elements in the liturgy it is rich in biblical connotations and so, at the outset, we need to pay attention to the details of the wording.

In the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom the Sanctus² reads:

Holy, holy, holy, Lord of Sabaoth,
heaven and earth are fully of your glory.
Hosanna is the highest ;
blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord,
hosanna in the highest.

These are, of course, two main biblical components of this acclamation, namely Isaiah 6:3 (the utterance of the Seraphim at the call of the prophet Isaiah) and Matthew 21:9 (the entry into Jerusalem, with the phraseology based on Psalm 118 (117):25-6. Since we are here primarily concerned with the first element, based on Isaiah 6:3, it will suffice to note that the Hosanna and Benedictus are subsequent addition to the Sanctus;³ what we should observe here is the fact that they refer to Christ.

Comparison with the biblical text of Isaiah 6:3 will show that the Sanctus proper is not quite an exact quotation. In the first place, all texts of the liturgical Sanctus refer to 'heaven and earth', whereas the biblical text has only 'the whole earth'. Second, the Sanctus is addressed directly to God,⁴ 'heaven and earth are full of *your* glory', whereas in Isaiah we find a statement, 'the whole earth is full of *his* glory'. As we shall discover, there is some uncertainty whether the Trinity, the Father, or the Son is being addressed in the Sanctus. All Western forms of the Sanctus provide a third divergence from Isaiah 6:3, adding the word 'God', Lord God of Sabaoth/Hosts'. This addition was probably due to the influence of Revelation 4:8, where the four winged beasts (who were later to become the symbols of the evangelists) sing 'Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty,⁵ who was, who is, who is to come'.

The link with Revelation 4:8 conveniently draws our attention to two details; the identity of the singers (seraphim in Isaiah, but cherubim

according to the Cherubic hymn). and the problem that all translators, both ancient and modern, have had with the Hebrew phrase *Yahweh Seba'ot*. We shall take the translator's crux first.

The Sauctus, in both its Greek and Latin forms, is based on the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint), and not directly on the Hebrew original of Isaiah 6:3. In the Septuagint the divine name Yahweh, revealed to Moses in the Burning Bush (Exodus 3) is regularly represented by *Kyrios*, 'Lord', following the Jewish practise of reading the sacred tetragrammation as *adonay*, 'my Lord'. For the second element,⁶ however, different Greek translators opted for different renderings. The translator of Isaiah happened to prefer a transliteration, hence the 'Sabaoth' of the Greek and Latin liturgical texts; most other translators preferred *Pantokrator*, 'Almighty', and this reflected in the adaptation of Isaiah 6:3 to be found in Revelation 4:8. In the Septuagint psalter a third rendering is adopted, 'Lord of powers'. Most English translations of the Bible, from the sixteenth century onwards,⁷ have opted for 'Lord of Hosts' which takes its inspiration from Jerome's Vulgate, 'Lord of armies'; Jerome, in turn, was borrowing from Aquila, a Jewish scholar of the second century AD who undertook a radical revision of the Greek translation of the Bible, conforming it to the Hebrew as closely as possible.

The problem posed by the phrase are just as great for the liturgical translator. The Book of Common Prayer adopted 'Lord of Hosts', familiar from the Authorised Version; this is also found in some English translations of the Orthodox Liturgy, though others prefer to keep the transliteration 'Sabaoth', reflecting the Septuagint, either in the form 'Lord Sabaoth' or as 'Lord of Sabaoth' (in both the Hebrew and the Greek the syntactical relationship is unclear). Modern Anglican and Roman Catholic liturgical revision has preferred to innovate with 'God of power and might'. The nearest antecedents of this rendering would seem to lie in 'Almighty' of Revelation 4:8 (which some might consider preferable).

The singers of the thrice-holy hymn

In Isaiah it is the seraphim,⁸ and not the cherubim, who utter the thrice-holy hymn. The author of the Cherubic hymn is clearly following Revelation 4:8 here, correctly recognising in the four beasts a reference to Ezekiel's vision of the four living creatures (Ezekiel) whom he then equates with the cherubim of Ezekiel 10. It is interesting that Jewish liturgical tradition associates Isaiah 6:3 with another passage in Ezekiel (3:12), 'Blessed be the glory of the Lord from his place'.⁹

When introducing the Sanctus most eucharistic prayers, both Eastern and Western, mention various other categories of heavenly beings as well as the seraphim and cherubim. Thus the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom includes 'thousands of archangels and tens of thousands of angels', reflecting the phraseology of Daniel 7:10, the vision of the Ancient of Days. This association is very old within Christian liturgical tradition and is already to be found in the First Letter of St Clement of Rome.

The significance of Isaiah's vision

As we shall see below, the combining of Isaiah 6 : 3 with Revelation 4 : 8 and Daniel 7 : 10 is important from another point of view, for the former definitely suggests, and the latter could suggest,¹⁰ that Christ, rather than the Father or the Trinity is the person being addressed. But before considering this problem we need to look at the context of Isaiah's vision, for this throws some helpful light on the meaning of the liturgical Sanctus.

We can isolate three main elements in the course of the prophet's vision in the Temple. First of all acknowledges his unworthiness, 'Woe is me [..] I am a man of unclean lips'. Then, in response to this, one of the seraphim touches his lips with a burning coal and states 'your guilt is taken away, your sin is forgiven'. Finally comes Isaiah's mission, 'Whom shall I send?' 'Send me [...]'. We have here the movement from wonder and awe to confession of unworthiness, followed by sanctification and forgiveness, leading to mission. This is a sequence to which we shall be returning later; here it is sufficient to observe how eminently appropriate it is to the eucharistic context of the Sanctus. Indeed, from the fourth century onwards the 'burning coal' which touched Isaiah's lips was actually identified with the consecrated Host. The earliest witness to this understanding happens to be St Ephrem (d. 373), who writes (Hymns on faith 10, stanzas 8-10) :

In your Bread there is hidden the Spirit who is not consumed,
in your Wine there dwells the Fire that is not drunk;
the Spirit is in your bread, the Fire in your Wine,
a manifold wonder which our lips have received.
When the Lord came to earth to mortal beings
He created them again in a new creation, like angels,
mingling Fire and Spirit within them
so that in hidden manner they might be of fire and spirit.
The seraph could not touch the coal of fire with his own fingers,
and he just touched Isaiah's mouth;
the seraph did not hold the coal of fire, Isaiah did not consume it,
but as for us, our Lord has allowed us to do both.

If we turn to early patristic commentaries on Isaiah we discover that the Fathers understood Isaiah's vision as foreshadowing the incarnation in two separate ways. Why, they ask, does the biblical text speak of 'the whole earth' being full of God's glory? Heaven one would expect to be filled with the divine glory, but the reference to the presence of his glory on earth as well must point to some future theophany — in other words, the incarnation.¹¹ A further allusion to the incarnation is discovered in the thrice repeated 'holy' : this the Fathers see as a clear reference to the Trinity, revealed *par excellence* at Christ's baptism.¹²

To whom is the Sanctus addressed?

In view of this patristic understanding of the implications of the three-fold 'holy' in Isaiah, the statement in the Cherubic hymn that the cherubim

sing ' the thrice-holy hymn to the life-giving Trinity ' seems obvious enough, and indeed in the vast majority of Eastern and Western eucharistic prayers this identification is brought out in the opening words of the prayer immediately following the Sanctus.¹³ It is intriguing, however, to find that there are some Eastern anaphoras where the Sanctus is referred only to the Father,¹⁴ or only to the Son.¹⁵ This second understanding is of particular interest, not only in view of the addition to the Sanctus of the Benedictus, which clearly refers to Christ, but also because it sheds a sidelight on two other places in the Eastern eucharistic liturgies which draw upon the threefold ' holy ' of Isaiah 6:3, both of which may be understood as referring either to the Trinity or to Christ. I refer to the Trisagion, the acclamation of ' Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal ' which occurs in the Byzantine and other Eastern liturgies before the Lections,¹⁶ and to the response to the priest's pre-communion statement ' Holy things for the holy ' (*sancta sanctis*).

The Trisagion

The interpretation of the Trisagion—whether it should be understood as referring to the Trinity or to Christ—came to be an emotive and contentious issue during the course of the fifth to eighth centuries and proved to be the sparking point for many an ecclesiastical riot, whether in Constantinople or in Aleppo. With hindsight we can now see that, as happened so often with the theological controversies of the period, misunderstandings arose largely as a result of wilful misinterpretation of the other party's position.

The origins of the Trisagion are obscure.¹⁷ Its first definite mention was at the Council of Chalcedon (451), and it was probably then a fairly recent introduction. According to one tradition the wording had been revealed by an angel during a series of earthquakes at Constantinople about the year 430, in the time of Proclus. A rival tradition asserted that it had been revealed by angels to Joseph of Arimathea (this probably arose because of the use of the Trisagion in the Good Friday Liturgy). More prosaically, a sixth-century writer held that it was simply a juxtaposition of Isaiah 6 : 3 with Psalm 42 (41):2, where some Greek manuscripts have ' My soul has thirsted for God, the Mighty, the Living ' (that is, Immortal). It is also worth noticing that the Trisagion has some remarkable similarities with the Targum, or Jewish Aramic liturgical translation, of Isaiah 6:3, which reads ;

Holy in the heavens on high,
in the House of his Shekhina [Divine Presence] ;
holy on earth,
the handiwork of his might ;
holy in the age of ages,
Yahweh Sabaoth ;
all the earth is full of the radiance of his glory.

It is clear that originally different geographical areas understood the Trisagion in different ways. At Jerusalem, Constantinople and in the west, it was taken to be addressed to the Trinity, whereas, in Syria, parts of Asia Minor and Egypt it was understood as referring to Christ.¹⁸ The addition in

Syria, by Peter the Fuller, patriarch of Antioch (d. 488), of the words 'who was crucified for us', in order to enforce a christological interpretation, only made the matter more inflammatory, especially in the eyes of those who disapproved of theopaschite language. Eventually, because Constantinople represented the centre of chalcedonian orthodoxy in the East, and Syria the stronghold of opposition to the chalcedonian definition that 'the Incarnate Christ is one *in* two natures', this division of opinion, originally a purely geographical matter, took on ecclesiastical overtones, and a trinitarian interpretation of the Trisagion came to be seen as a hallmark of chalcedonian orthodoxy.

Amidst the violent polemical literature propagated by both sides some welcome light relief is provided by two developments. At Antioch someone had managed to teach a parrot to repeat the Trisagion with the addition 'who was crucified for us'; this was soon adduced as testimony to the correctness of the addition, and we have a long poem on the subject to Syriac, written by Isaac of Antioch. Secondly, there is the emergence in the early sixth century of specific names given to the two thieves crucified alongside Christ; to one of them the name 'Demas' was allocated—in mockery of the addition to the Trisagion of the words 'who was crucified for us [*di' hemas*]'.¹⁹

There are in fact quite strong reasons for thinking that the christological understanding of the Trisagion is earlier than the trinitarian, and that its original context was indeed that of the crucifixion'. 'Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal' is thus a statement of faith in Christ's divinity, power and immortality at the very moment when these attributes seem to the ordinary eye to be totally absent. 'Holy Immortal', in particular, would seem best fitted to a christological understanding. However, where the trinitarian interpretation is current (as in the Byzantine rite), 'Immortal' will refer to the Trinity as a whole, and not to the Holy Spirit in particular.

The Syrian understanding of the Trisagion, then, offers further evidence for a christological interpretation of the threefold 'holy' in Isaiah 6:3, hints of which we have also found in connection with the Sanctus. An example of the early liturgical application of such an interpretation of Isaiah 6:3 is to be found in a recently published liturgical fragment on papyrus from Egypt, dated to the third or fourth century. This reads²⁰

Holy, holy, [holy is he who] sits at
the right hand of the Fa[ther].

The dry climate of Egypt has also preserved quite a number of liturgical fragments in Greek containing expanded forms of the Trisagion, where the farcings always imply a christological understanding of the Trisagion. Most of these are dated from the fifth to seventh centuries, though it has been claimed that one of them belongs to the fourth century (which seems improbable).²¹ Various episodes in the life of Christ may be referred to as the following example (preserved in two manuscripts) will illustrate.²²

He who created all things,
God, the Word, lies in a manger,
born of the Virgin.

—Holy is God
whom John saw in the Jordan,
having come from above
to be baptised there ;

—Holy Mighty.
He whom the Hebrews put to death
under Pilate, though he was innocent,
arose on the third day.

—Holy Immortal
who was crucified [the other manuscript has ' incarnate ']
for us in order to save the world by his own will ;
have mercy on us.

' Holy things for the holy '

The third position in the Liturgy at which use is made of Isaiah 6:3 occurs at the fraction in the response, found in all the Eastern anaphoras, to the acclamation ' Holy things for the holy '.²³ Once again we encounter two quite different understandings, one trinitarian, the other christological, of the threefold ' holy ' in Isaiah. In view of the bitter controversy over the Trisagion it is ironical that Constantinopolitan usage here associates Isaiah 6:3 with the Son, for the choir responds to the priest with the words ' One is holy, one is Lord, Jesus Christ, to the glory of God the Father '. The oriental rites,²⁴ on the other hand, consistently provide a trinitarian interpretation :

The one Father is holy,
the one Son is holy,
the one Spirit is holy.

Once again the difference in understanding was primarily due to geographical, and not ecclesiastical, considerations. Both understandings are old, and the fact that each liturgical tradition itself attests to both interpretations of Isaiah 6:3 at different points within the Liturgy indicates that each tradition tacitly recognises the legitimacy of both understandings. Put schematically, we have the following pattern:

<i>Constantinople</i>	Trisagion : trinitarian Sancta sanctis: christological
<i>Oriental Churches</i> ²⁵	Trisagion: christological Sancta sanctis: trinitarian.

There is an important lesson to be learnt from all this in the context of liturgical reform and ecumenical understanding today. Where a liturgical tradition is divided on a basic point of exegesis, such as we have been considering, two quite different approaches can be adopted. On the one hand, it can be claimed that one understanding alone can be right, in which case the other must be wrong; uniformity is therefore not only desirable, but also needs to be imposed, if any form of unity is to be attained. This was

manifestly the dominant attitude during the centuries of strife over the Trisagion. But its disruptive and destructive effects should suffice to convince us that such an approach is essentially misguided. The alternative is to appreciate that *both* understandings may be legitimate: in this case it is not a matter of contradiction, but of complementarity. This approach is indeed implicit in the various Eastern liturgies themselves, in that each acknowledges both interpretations of Isaiah 6:3, though at different points in the course of the service. In retrospect it seems obvious that this second approach alone is acceptable. In a wider liturgical context it implies that unity is to be sought in a common skeletal structure, and not in the flesh that covers the skeleton. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same approach needs to be applied to the doctrinal divisions brought about in Eastern Christendom by the Council of Chalcedon.²⁶

The significance of the Sanctus

It is time to return to the Sanctus in order to consider some wider aspects of its significance. In the Book of Isaiah the 'thrice-holy hymn' accompanies a theophany, the revelation of God's glory on earth; appropriately enough it comes shortly before the Emmanuel prophecy of Isaiah 7. As we have seen, this theophany is understood by the Fathers as having taken place supremely at the incarnation, and then continuously, at each celebration of the eucharistic Liturgy, at the coming of Christ in the consecrated Bread and Wine. It is thus entirely fitting that we should join the seraphim and the other heavenly beings in the acclamation of God's holiness during the Liturgy in acknowledgement of this coming.

In scripture 'holiness' is an attribute of God's nature; and, since 'holiness' is understood in Jewish tradition as implying separateness, the acclamation 'Holy is the Lord Sabaoth' is accordingly a statement about God's separateness, or transcendence. 'Glory', on the other hand, is what accompanies God when he reveals himself in creation. Thus in the Sanctus we are presented with a movement from transcendence to immanence. This movement from God to creation always invites a response, a movement back from humanity to God. In the biblical understanding this movement back, from humanity to God, is also associated with the idea of holiness. Whenever we make any kind of offering to God we too set things aside, separate them, for the specific use of God; we place things in the realm of God, we consecrate them. And by belonging to God, the offering itself becomes holy, benefiting, as it were, from God's holiness.

In the eucharistic Liturgy above all we encounter this double movement, from God to humanity, and from humanity to God, where the meeting point of the two movements is Christ. God comes to meet us in Christ, who is made present through the power of the Holy Spirit, in response to our offering up the fruits of our co-operation with God's creation—the bread which we have made from God's gift of wheat, and the wine which we have made from God's gift of the grape. At the consecration the Bread and Wine not only enter into the realm of God's holiness, but they also then take on a theophanic role. At the communion the movement is now reversed: what

has been made 'holy' and consecrated — in this case united with Christ himself—now moves back again to humanity, in order to sanctify the communicant, to make him or her holy.

Going back to the Sanctus and its context in Isaiah 6 we recall the sequence of wonder at the manifestation of God's holiness leading to the sense of unworthiness, followed by forgiveness and sanctification which results in mission. This is exactly what happens in the eucharistic liturgy as a whole. Communion brings both forgiveness and sanctification, after which we too are sent out, to be 'apostles' (those sent), missionaries. The Sanctus thus provides an ideal opening for every eucharistic prayer. We join the angelic beings and the saints—all who have been already sanctified—in being filled with awe at God's glory as it is being manifested on earth, and we respond with this statement of God's holiness. As St Cyril of Jerusalem puts it, 'we take part in the hymn of praise with the hosts above the cosmos'. We become part of the unending heavenly liturgy.

As we have seen, most of Christian tradition has taken the 'thrice-holy hymn' of the Sanctus to refer to the Trinity, and certainly this seems particularly appropriate at this moment in the eucharistic liturgy, pointing to the Father as the source of sanctification, to the Son who, by becoming one of us and offering himself up, was sanctified, and to the Holy Spirit who provides the means of our sanctification. We have here a pattern of that triangular relationship which is characteristic of the way in which we experience the operation of the Trinity. The paradigm for this was set out above all at Christ's baptism, at the public proclamation of the anointing of Christ which had taken place in a hidden fashion at the incarnation, at the first moment of his conception: at the baptism the Father is the anointer, the Son the anointed, and the Spirit the unction. At our baptismal rebirth we too become 'anointed ones' or 'christs',²⁷ we too are proclaimed to be 'children of God'. According to Hebrew idiom the phrase 'sons of God' properly implies 'belonging to the category of divine beings'. In other words, we have been given the potential of becoming divinised, where 'divinisation' or *theosis* is nothing other than the consequence of the movement towards sanctification implied by the 'thrice-holy hymn' in the Liturgy.

-
1. The only extant eucharistic prayer from which it is absent is that in the Apostolic Tradition attributed to Hippolytus (though Ratcliff held that the presence of a Sanctus was nevertheless implied).
 2. To avoid confusion I shall use the Latin term, reserving 'Trisagion' for the acclamation 'Holy God, holy Mighty, holy Immortal', and 'Sancta sanctis' for the pre-communion acclamation.
 3. First attested by Caesarius of Arles in the 6th century; it entered the Roman liturgy by the seventh, and Eastern liturgies by the eighth century. In the late sixteenth-century polyphonic performances of the Mass led to the separation of the Benedictus from the Sanctus for practical reasons. In the Book of Common Prayer the Benedictus was suppressed altogether. There is some divergence in details of the wording in the different liturgical traditions.
 4. An exception is provided by the archaic East Syrian anaphora attributed to Addai and Mari.

5. As will be seen this is based on the Hebrew phrase 'Lord God of Sabaoth' which occurs 18 times in the Old Testament; it is an expansion of the more archaic 'Lord (of) Sabaoth' which occurs over 250 times.
6. Both the meaning of *Seba'ot* and its syntactical relationship to *Yahweh* remain uncertain.
7. Still found in the Revised Standard Version and the New English Bible, for example.
8. Whether there are just two (so Origen), or more (so Eusebius) was disputed.
9. In the Qedusha (or Sanctification) during the Morning Service; this may go back to the second or third century AD. Isaiah 6:3 is quoted in its exact biblical form. On the relationship between the Qedusha and the Sanctus see especially D. Flusser, 'Sanktus and Gloria' in *Abraham unser Vater : Festschrift fur O. Michel* (Leiden 1963), pp. 129-52, and E. Werner, 'The genesis of the liturgical Sanctus', in *Essays presented to Egon Wellesz*, ed. J. Westrup (Oxford 1966), pp. 19-23. In Christian liturgical texts Ezekiel 3:12 is only very rarely combined with Isaiah 6:3 (an example can be found in the Syrian Orthodox Fenhitho, vi. 461b).
10. In the old Septuagint version of Daniel the 'Ancient of Days' has become (by a small corruption in the text) identified with the 'son of man' (Dan. 7:14), whence many early Christian writers have taken 'Ancient of Days' as a christological title.
11. Thus already Eusebius in his recently published Commentary on Isaiah (G. C. S. Eusebius ix. 39).
12. Thus Theodoret, for example, explains in his Commentary on Isaiah that the thrice repeated 'holy' is an indication of the Trinity, whereas 'Lord Sabaoth' refers to the single nature of the Godhead.
13. The prayer introducing the Sanctus is addressed most commonly to the Father, but in some Eastern anaphoras the Trinity is addressed directly (for example: the Syriac anaphoras attributed to Addai and Mari, Jacob of Serugh ii, Dioscorus i and ii).
14. Thus the anaphora in Apostolic Constitutions viii, that described by Cyril of Jerusalem, and the Syriac anaphora attributed to John Chrysostom. This understanding is clearly an old one and is implied by Origen's interpretation of Isaiah 6:3 in his Homily I, 2 on Isaiah (G.C.S. Origenes viii. 244), where he takes the two seraphim to represent Christ and the Holy Spirit. Much that is relevant to this topic can be found in G. Kretschmar, *Studien zur fruhchristlichen Trinitatstheologie* (Tubingen 1956), pp. 62-82 (interpretations of Isaiah 6:3), and 134-82 (various understandings of the Sanctus).
15. Thus in the Coptic anaphora of St Gregory and in the original forms (*pace* Ratcliff) of the East Syrian anaphora of Addai and Mari and the related Maronite anaphora known as the Sharrar. The ninth century Syrian Orthodox scholar Moshe bar Kepha also refers to this interpretation in his Commentary on the Liturgy (tr. Connolly, p. 49).
16. And in the Offices. In Western tradition its use is confined to the Good Friday Liturgy.
17. For details of the sources for the traditions cited below see J. M. Hanssens, *Institutiones Liturgicae de Ritibus Orientalibus* i i (Rome 1932), pp. 91-156; also helpful is J. Mateos, *La celebration de la Parole dans la liturgie byzantine* (Orientalia Christiana Analecta 191 [1971]), pp. 91-126. The Trisagion is properly a statement ('Holy is God [...]'): see H. Engberding in *Jahrbuch fur Liturgiewissenschaft* 10 (1930), pp. 168-73.
18. That the issue was primarily geographical is shown by the fact that many Chalcedonian texts from Syria and adjacent areas (including Cyprus) presuppose a christological interpretation of the Trisagion: see V. S. Janeras, 'Les byzantins et le trisagion christologique' in *Miscelanea Liturgica G. Lercaro* ii (Rome 1967), pp. 469-99, and E. Klum-Bohmer, *Das Trisagion als Versohnungsformel der Christenheit* (Munchen/Wien 1979). Many examples of forced texts of the Trisagion still survive in the Maronite liturgy, including some with the controversial form.

MARY AND THE EUCHARIST : AN ORIENTAL PERSPECTIVE

Annunciation and epiclesis

On the basis of a straight forward reading of the New Testament there might not appear to be any very obvious connection between Mary and the Eucharist, and it is not even recorded that she was present at the Last Supper. The connection is to be sought for elsewhere, and is provided by the Holy Spirit—the ‘go-between God’—who plays a very similar role at the Annunciation and in the course of the Liturgy. It is this parallelism that I want to explore here in order to draw out something of the profound meaning that I believe it has. My sources will primarily be writers in the Syrian Orthodox tradition, since this is the one with which I am most familiar. But my impression is that what they have to say on the subject is fairly characteristic of Eastern Christian tradition as a whole.

In the Eastern eucharistic liturgies — and there are over one hundred anaphoras extant in the Eastern and the Oriental Orthodox tradition — the climax of the service comes with the priest’s invocation (epiclesis) of the Holy Spirit to consecrate the bread and wine, rather than with the words of the Institution narrative, as in Western tradition. In the Greek Liturgy of St Basil, for example, the priest prays :

Therefore, all-holy Lord, we too, whom you have allowed to serve at your holy altar, not for any virtue of our own (for never have we performed any good deed on earth), but because your mercy and compassion are so great, we make bold to approach your holy altar and offer you the sacrament of the holy Body and Blood of your Christ.

We beg and beseech you, most holy God, in your kindness and goodness, may your all-holy Spirit come upon us and upon these gifts set out, to bless and sanctify them, making this bread the precious Body of our Lord and God and Saviour Jesus Christ; and this cup the precious blood of our Lord and God and Saviour Jesus Christ, which was shed for the salvation of the world.

The other Eastern Liturgies have different wording, but the common element in them is the priest’s supplication that the Holy Spirit come, or be sent, upon those gathered and upon the bread and wine in order to effect their becoming the Body and Blood of Christ.

The wording of the epiclesis in the Liturgy of St Basil 'may your all-holy Spirit come upon us and upon these gifts'—makes clear the parallelism with the angel's words to Mary in Luke 1 : 35, 'The Holy Spirit shall *come upon you*, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow you; for this reason that which is born of you shall be called "holy", the 'Son of God'. In many of the Liturgies of the Syrian Orthodox Church the connection between the epiclesis and the Annunciation is made all the more patent by the use of the word 'overshadow' in the epiclesis itself. Thus the main Syrian Orthodox Liturgy, that of St James, contains the following passage :

Have mercy upon us, God the Father Almighty, and send upon us and upon these offerings set out your Holy Spirit, who is Lord and who gives life (....), who spoke in the Law and in the Prophets and in your New Covenant, who descended in the form of a dove upon our Lord Jesus Christ in the river Jordan, who descended too upon your holy disciples in the form of tongues of fire, (send your Spirit) so that he may *overshadow* and make this bread into the life-giving Body, the saving Body, the heavenly Body, the Body which brings salvation to our souls and bodies, the Body of our Lord and God and Saviour Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of sins and for the eternal life of those who receive, amen (...).

In view of the connection I am trying to bring out between the Annunciation and the epiclesis, it may at first seem surprising that it is not the Annunciation, but Christ's Baptism and Pentecost which receive explicit mention in the wording of this prayer. But if one turns to the commentaries on the Liturgy, one can see that awareness of the parallelism with the Annunciation is very much present. 'The priest's invocation of the Holy Spirit symbolizes Gabriel's annunciation to the Virgin',¹ is how one Syrian writer puts it. Another expresses the same idea even more explicitly : 'Just as the Holy Spirit descended to the womb of Mary—as the angel said, "the Holy Spirit shall come", and so on—and made the body of God the Word from the flesh of the Virgin, so too the Spirit descends on the bread and wine on the altar and makethem into the Body and Blood of God the Word which originated from the Virgin'.²

In a hymn of great beauty and profundity on the Holy Spirit and the sacraments St Ephrem already makes the same connection in the fourth century. He addresses Christ :

In the womb that bore you are Fire and Spirit,
Fire and Spirit are in the river where you were baptized,
Fire and Spirit are in our baptism too,
And in the Bread and Cup are Fire and Spirit.³

The Christological background

Here I should point out that this view of the intimate relationship between Annunciation and epiclesis is often (but not exclusively) tied up with one particular pattern of christological thinking, the so-called Alexandrian Pattern, as opposed to the Antiochene. God *becomes* flesh, the Godhead

takes on a new mode of being: without ceasing to be God, the Word becomes man as well. The converse of this—and the whole aim of the Incarnation—is seen as the divinization of man: without ceasing to be man, man takes on a new dimension through baptism, as a son of God. This new role is at the same time his *proper* role as far as the intention of God's creation is concerned. Man had originally been created to be a son of God, but through the misapplication of his free-will he had fallen short of this intended role at the Fall; the entire purpose of the Incarnation is to right this situation. Such a way of looking at things has a satisfying symmetry about it: the Word, who is God by nature, becomes Man by grace, so that man, who is human by nature, might become a son of God by grace.⁴

It is an analogous transformation that the bread and wine are considered to undergo at the epiclesis. Without ceasing to be outwardly bread and wine, they now take on a totally new significance. A twelfth-century commentator on the Liturgy, Dionysius bar Salibi, puts it as follows:

The Body and Blood are called 'mysteries' because they are not what they appear to the physical eye to be; for to look at, they are just bread and wine, but properly understood, they are the Body and Blood of God. Just as Jesus was seen by the physical eye as man, yet he is also God; similarly the mysteries are seen outwardly to be bread and wine, but they are in fact the Body and Blood.⁵

We are clearly on delicate ground here, since all this touches on technical matters of Christology and eucharistic theology, the battle grounds of so much controversy. These are not our concern here, since our interest is rather in the significance of the parallelism itself. Nevertheless, without going into details, two points of explanation may be helpful.

First, it may be noted that the parallelism between Annunciation and epiclesis is brought out by East Syrian as well as Syrian Orthodox writers, that is to say by those who adopt a completely different Christology. Moreover it is also found in Greek writers, and indeed in a famous work of Pope Gelasius,⁶ though for a number of reasons it was never much developed in Western writers.

Secondly, there is a difference between East and West in emphasis, as well as in the way of expressing what happens to the bread and the wine. Eastern writers, whether Greek or Syriac, naturally do not employ the scholastic terminology developed in the medieval West. Instead they use a variety of words such as 'change' or 'transform', and the resultant difference of emphasis is well brought out by John Meyendorff in his *Byzantine Theology*: 'The Byzantines understood the eucharistic bread to be necessarily *consubstantial* with humanity, while Latin medieval piety emphasized its "supersubstantiality", its otherworldliness'.⁷

The implications of the parallelism between Annunciation and epiclesis, between Mary and the Eucharist, do not tie up directly with all this; but I think that it is true to say that they follow on *better* from the Eastern

(and for that matter, Vatican II's and indeed Luther's) understanding of the nature of the Real Presence at the Eucharist, than from the medieval scholastic position.

The sanctification of the material world

What then is the significance of this parallelism between the Annunciation and the Eucharist?

The Eucharist is to be seen as providing a model for the proper relationship between the material world and the heavenly.⁸ At the epiclesis the Holy Spirit effects this new, and proper, relationship of the created world to the Creator: the bread and wine, which represent both 'fruit of the earth' and 'the work of human hands', are transformed into the saving Body and Blood of Christ. The Bread and Wine at the epiclesis take on a new mode of being. They remain outwardly bread and wine (in scholastic terms, the accidents remain), but their significance has now taken on a totally new dimension, in that they have become the Body and Blood of Christ. What we have here is a paradigm for the transforming power of the Holy Spirit: a hint of how the material world as a whole can become a sacrament, and at the same time an indication of how the Christian too can become transformed by his co-operation with the Holy Spirit. With the eye of faith—itself the gift of the Spirit—the process of sanctification is allowed to overflow and spill out, as it were, *beyond* the sacraments, so that the world itself takes on a new sacramental dimension to the beholder. As Philoxenus, a writer of the fifth-sixth century, puts it: 'without faith, everything is ordinary; but when faith has come, even mean things appear glorious'.⁹ With this faith, the believer can see the potential of creation, of his fellow men, eschatologically realized; he sees them as God intends them to be seen. It is a glimpse of the Kingdom as it should be realized on earth.

With this vision the Christian can begin to enter into God's unfathomable love for his creature, man. The outcome is an overwhelming feeling of humility and compassion towards the whole of creation, a feeling described by St Isaac the Syrian in a famous passage:

The heart that is enflamed like this embraces the entire creation—man, birds, animals and even demons. At the recollection of them, and at the sight of them, such a man's eyes fill with tears that arise from the great compassion that presses on his heart. The heart grows tender and cannot endure to hear of or look upon any injury or even the smallest suffering inflicted upon anything in creation. For this reason such a man prays unceasingly with tears even for irrational animals and for the enemies of truth and for all who harm it, that they may be guarded and strengthened.¹⁰

This sensitivity to suffering is in itself a form of entering into Christ's own sufferings. At the same time what is being effected is the advent of the Kingdom within us, for which we pray in the Lord's Prayer. It is this advent of the Kingdom of God on earth that is specifically mentioned

as the intended outcome of the sending of the Holy Spirit upon the bread and wine in the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom.

This anticipation of the Kingdom of heaven on earth is in fact a commonplace in the writings of the Fathers. As St Ephrem puts it,

We have eaten Christ's body in place of the fruit of the Tree of Paradise, and his altar has taken the place of the Garden of Eden for us; the curse has been washed away by his innocent blood, and in the hope of the resurrection we await the life that is to come, *and indeed we already walk in this new life*, in that we already have the pledge of it.¹¹

Co-operation with the Holy Spirit

It is in the realization of the effects of the Holy Spirit's consecration of the Bread and Wine at the Eucharist that the parallelism with the Annunciation takes on significance, for it is Mary's receptivity there which provides the model for co-operation between man and the Holy Spirit. Through the Eucharist man is given the potential for sanctification, for the realization of the gift of divine sonship which he has already potentially received at Baptism. But in order for this to take effect, he must accept, as Mary accepted; he must allow the Holy Spirit to work in him, to give full space to the Holy Spirit, and not to 'grieve' or 'constrain' him, as Paul put it.¹² Such 'constraint' would mean the restricting of the action of the Holy Spirit within us by means of the imposition or, more accurately, the interference of human self-will.

A hint of the way in which the Eucharist can thus transform the whole of human life is to be found in another passage of that great seventh century mystic, St Isaac the Syrian:

When we have found love, we eat the heavenly bread and we are sustained without labour and without weariness. Heavenly bread is that which has descended from heaven and which gives the world life; this is the food of angels.

He who has found love eats Christ at all times and becomes immortal from then onwards. For whoever eats of this bread shall not taste death in eternity. Blessed is he that has eaten from the bread of love which is Jesus. Whoever is fed with love is fed with Christ, who is the all-governing God. John witnesses to this when he says: 'God is Love'. Thus he who lives with love in this creation smells life from God: he breathes here the air of the resurrection. In this air the righteous will delight at the resurrection. Love is the kingdom of which our Lord spoke, when symbolically he promised the disciples that they would eat in his kingdom: 'you shall eat and drink at the table of my kingdom.' What should they eat, if not love? Love is sufficient to feed man instead of food and drink. This is the wine that gladdens the heart of man; blessed is he who has drunk of this wine. This is the wine which the debauched have

drunk and they became chaste, the sinners have drunk and they forgot the paths of stumbling, the drunk and they became fasters, the rich and they became desirous of poverty, the poor and they became rich in hope, the sick and they regained strength, the fools and they became wise.¹³

The descent of the Spirit upon Mary, who bears Christ as the fruit of her co-operation, thus finds close correspondence with the descent of the Spirit upon the Bread and the Wine—provided their recipients are as open to the action of the Spirit as was Mary—in turn bear fruit in them as they are transformed into men and women who are truly ‘conformed to Christ’.

There is thus a striking complementarity between the Annunciation and the epiclesis in the Eucharist. To bring out the point, one could put the matter in somewhat bizarre fashion and say that for God to become part of the material world and to take on flesh and blood, the Holy Spirit has to invite—one could almost say ‘invoke’—Mary for her co-operation; whereas, for the bread and wine, representatives of the material world, to take on their new vivifying and sanctifying role as the Body and Blood of Christ, the priest as representative of the faithful has to invoke the Holy Spirit, who then effects this.

Thus at the epiclesis the means for raising mankind up to a divine mode of existence are provided. But the consequent bringing about of this is not imposed on man. Rather, as in the case of the Incarnation itself, this follows *only* at the consent and co-operation of the individual. In other words, at every communion, the Christian needs to make Mary’s reply to the angel his or her own. Only thus is the potential to sanctify possessed by the Bread and Wine to be realized.

It is an awareness of this aspect of Mary’s co-operation with the Holy Spirit that accounts for the great veneration that Orthodox tradition has for Mary in her role as Theotokos. She conceived God in her womb, not as the result of an initiative of her own, but solely thanks to her receptivity, the active emptying of her own self-will. Thus she was able to unite her will totally with God’s. We shall see below how the Greek mystic St Symeon the New Theologian describes the mystery of the saints who themselves ‘conceived’ the Word in their hearts in a manner analogous to Mary’s conception of the Word in her womb.

Christ the Pearl

This important ‘structural’ relationship in the pattern of divine economy between Mary and the Eucharist finds expression in a number of other ways in the Syrian and Greek Fathers, and it is to two of these that I should like to turn now. One belongs to the field of symbolism; the other to that of typology.

According to a myth widespread in antiquity, it was when lightning struck the pearl oyster in the sea that pearls were created—the result of the conjunction of two disparate elements, fire and water. St Ephrem has a

famous set of five hymns where he meditates on the mystery of the birth of Christ the Pearl as a result of the coming of the fire of the Holy Spirit upon the 'watery tomb' of Mary.¹⁴ The descent of the fire of the Holy Spirit at the epiclesis likewise produces 'pearls', a term that has become a standard one for the consecrated elements in both Greek and Syriac. As another great Syriac poet, Jacob of Serugh (late fifth century), puts it:

The Holy Spirit goes forth from the Father
and descends, overshadows and resides on the bread, making it the
Body,
making it the treasured pearls
to adorn the souls that are betrothed to him.¹⁵

The pearl can also be a symbol for the soul. But although pearl imagery might be thought suitable to describe the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the soul and its ensuing sanctification, this imagery is not, to my knowledge, ever developed in this sense.

Typological links

The other way by which the Eastern Fathers implicitly brought out the relationship between Mary and the Eucharist was through typology.¹⁶ Typology is essentially a means of providing a network of links and connections between the Old Testament and the New, between this world and the heavenly; through these connections its aim is to draw out meanings of great profundity from Scripture. It is of course totally unhistorical and essentially subjective, for it is dealing with a completely different kind of reality from that of historical scholarship; nevertheless it is the vehicle for hinting at spiritual realities and meanings that a purely historical reading of the Bible will entirely miss.

How then does Mary provide typological links with the Eucharist? The pivotal biblical verse is John 19:34, the piercing of the side of Christ on the Cross, as the result of which 'there came forth blood and water'.¹⁷ It may be that already in the mind of the author of the Gospel the words 'blood and water' were intended to bear a sacramental meaning. In any case this is the regular understanding of the passage in the Fathers: the water represents Baptism and the blood the Eucharist. In more poetical terms this sacramental blood and water can be described as the Church, the Bride born miraculously from the side of Christ, as Eve was 'born' from Adam's side in Paradise. As Jacob of Serugh puts it in a wonderful homily on the veil of Moses:

The Bridegroom's side was pierced, and from it came forth the Bride,
fulfilling the type provided by Eve and Adam;
for from the first God knew and depicted
Adam and Eve in the likeness of the image of his Only-Begotten:
Christ slept on the cross as Adam has slept his deep sleep,
his side was pierced, and from it there came forth the Daughter of
Light—

water and blood of an image of divine children
 to be heirs to the Father who loves his only-Begotten.
 Eve in prophecy is the mother of all that lives—
 and what, if not baptism, is the mother of life ?
 Adam's wife bore human bodies subject to death,
 but the virgin Church bears living beings who are spiritual.
 Adam's side gave birth to a woman who gives birth to mortals,
 while our Lord's to the Church, who gives birth to immortals.¹⁸

Eve is here contrasted typologically with the Church, mother of the sacraments. But in innumerable other passages the contrast is with Mary, the second Eve and mother of the second Adam. In another passage Jacob of Serugh brings out the chiasmic set of relationships :

As our father Adam begot our mother Eve without intercourse.
 so did Mary give birth, just as Adam did before he sinned.
 The Holy Spirit blew on Adam's face
 and he gave birth to Eve: this Spirit did Mary too receive and she
 gave birth to the Son.¹⁹

Into this typological pattern Ephrem introduces a specifically eucharistic note to describe Mary's role :

Mary has given us the Bread of rest
 in place of that bread of toil which Eve provided.²⁰

If we examine this intricate web of typology we can once again observe the basic complementarity between Mary and the Eucharist (and for that matter, Baptism as well) : she is the essential meeting point between God and man in the process of the Incarnation, the descent of God to man, just as the sacraments are the meeting point between man and God in the process of sanctification, or (as Eastern tradition expresses it) the divinization of man, the ascent of man to God. At the same time the sacraments continuously 'give birth' to Christians, just as Mary gave birth to Christ. In the sacraments the Holy Spirit's activity is assured; what is required is the assent of the individual, corresponding to Mary's assent at the Annunciation. If that assent is given, then the individual Christian too will 'conceive' Christ in his or her heart, just as Mary herself conceived. This bold and striking idea is put forward in a passage of great beauty by St Symeon the New Theologian.

' Mothers of Christ '

Symeon was commenting on the parable of Matthew 22 : 1-14, ' the kingdom of heaven is like a king who made marriage feasts for his son and invited many '. In answer to the question, ' who is the bride '? , he states that she is none other than Mary : the mystic marriage is consummated at the entry of the Word into her womb at the Annunciation. Symeon continues :

Taking this parable as my starting point, and always keeping to the Gospel wording, grace allows me to understand something more and she urges me to express what happens continually in a mysterious way with the children of light. Why does the Gospel text speak of 'marriage feasts' and not 'a marriage feast'? This suggests to me a novel idea; why should it use the plural? It is because in the case of each of the faithful, the children of day, the same marriage is continuously taking place in an analogous fashion. How does this happen? By uniting himself to us in a completely spotless and holy marriage God effects something quite beyond our powers.

Symeon here begins on a new chapter which has the heading :

Concerning how all the saints conceive the Word of God within themselves in an analogous way to the Theotokos : as they give birth to him, he is born in them and they themselves are given birth by him; and concerning how they are described as his *mothers* as well as children and brothers.²¹

The chapter then opens :

The Son of God, who is God himself, by entering the womb of the all-holy Virgin and taking flesh from her and becoming man, was born, perfect God and perfect man, being both at one and the same time without confusion. Consider how this compares with what has happened to us. Each of us believes in the same Son of God and Son of the ever Virgin Mary, Mother of God; if, truly believing, we receive the message concerning him in our hearts and confess him with our mouths, repenting for our former sins with all our soul, then immediately, just as God the Word of the Father entered into the Virgin's womb, so too the Word which we receive in our religious teaching takes seed within us too. This is a mystery full of awe and utter astonishment, and what has been said is trustworthy and is to be received with assurance and faith. We conceive him, not in body, as the Virgin Mother of God conceived him, but spiritually—though none the less really. We have him, whom the chaste Virgin conceived in our own hearts... 1. Consequently, if we believe with all our soul and repent with real fervour, we shall 'conceive' the Word of God in our hearts, just as the Virgin did. Nevertheless since the Word of God only once became flesh of the Virgin and was born physically from her in a manner that cannot be described or expressed, consequently it is out of the question that he should become incarnate or be born in the body again from any one of us. What then? That immaculate flesh which he took from the chaste body of Mary, the immaculate Mother of God, that flesh with which he was physically born, he gives us for food. And as we eat it, each of us who eat this flesh in faith and worthily, will have wholly in ourselves the incarnate God, our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the son of the spotless Virgin Mary.

In all this I feel we are touching upon a mystery of great profundity
 1 ng. Something of this is brought out in the dramatic tension

implied in the typological relationship between Mary and the Church and the sacraments. On the one hand, Mary corresponds to the Church as the source of the sacraments, in that she herself gave birth to Christ, the very fountain-head of these sacraments. On the other hand, she corresponds to, and provides the model for, the individual Christian who receives the vivifying sacraments. Whether they will allow the Holy Spirit to transform their lives through the sacraments, depends on whether they make the same reply as Mary at her Annunciation. If they do, they too will become, as Symeon hints, 'mothers' of Christ.

Mary's eschatological role

Mary's co-operation, or to use the Greek term, synergism, in the Incarnation provides the model and example of fulfilled humanity, of man in his proper relationship to God. It is the re-establishment of the proper relationship between man and God, between the material world and God, the process by which all creation is transformed by the operation of the Holy Spirit, that lies at the very centre of the mystery of both the Incarnation and the Eucharist.

Mary's role is both a historical one and an eschatological one : historical, in that she gave birth to God in the flesh in time; eschatological in that proleptically she represents humanity as a whole raised up to its proper relationship to God at the end of time. In that the Eucharist is the continuing means of recovering this proper relationship, Mary still plays a central role in our understanding of what the Holy Spirit effects in the sacraments.

NOTES

1. Dionysius bar Salibi (d. 1171), *Commentary on the Liturgy*, ed. H. Labourt, C.S.C.O. 13, Scr. Syri 13, p. 68.
2. Moshe bar Kepha (d. 903), *Commentary on the Liturgy* in : R. H. Connolly and H. W. Codrington, *Two Commentaries on the Jacobite Liturgy* (London 1913), p. 60 (Dionysius, *Comm. Lit.*, p. 67).
3. *Hymus Faith* 10, 17 (for a complete translation of the hymn see R. Murray in : ECR iii. 2 (1970), pp. 142-50).
4. Compare Ephrem, *Hymns on Faith*, 29, 1.
5. Dionysius, *Commentary on the Liturgy*, p. 61.
6. In his *De duabus naturis* 14 (A Thiel, *Epistolae Romanorum Pontificum Genuinae* [Braunsberg 1868], pp. 541-2).
7. J. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology* (London 1975), p. 204.
8. See my 'World and Sacrament in the Writings of the Syrian Fathers', *Sobornost* 6:10 (1974), pp 685-96, (chapter 1, above).
9. Philoxenus, *Homily* iii. 53 (French tr. in *Sources chretiennes* 44, p. 72).
10. Tr. A. J. Wensinck, *Mystic Treatises by Isaac of Nineveh* (Amsterdam 1923), p. 341.
11. Ephrem, *Commentary on the Diatessaron* xxi. 25 (French translation in *Sources, chretiennes* 121, p. 388)
12. Eph. 4 : 30.
13. Tr. Wensinck, pp. 211-12.
14. *Hymus on Faith* 81-85. (E. T. of hymn 82 in my *Harp of the Spirit* (*Studies Supplementary to Sobornost* 4 (1975), pp. 31-3.
15. P. Bedjan, *Homiliae Selectae Mar Jacobi Sarugensis* (Paris-Leipzig 1908) iv. 597

16. See R. Murray, 'Mary the Second Eve in the early Syriac Fathers' *ECR* iii. 3 (1971) pp. 372-84, and my *Mary in Syriac Tradition* (Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary [London] 1977).
17. See my 'The Mysteries Hidden in the Side of Christ', *Sobornost* 7:6 (1978), pp. 462-72, (chapter 7, below).
18. P. Bedjan, *Homiliae Selectae Mar Jacobi Sarugensis* (Paris-Leipzig 1907) iii. 299-300.
19. Jacob of Serugh in P. Bedjan, *S. Martyrii qui et Sahdona quae supersunt* (Paris-Leipzig 1902), p. 634.
20. Ephrem, *Hymns on Unleavened Bread* 6.7.
21. Symeon *Ethika* i. 9-10 (*Sources chretiennes* 122, p. 249-57). Among modern writers the idea is found notably in some of the works of Catherine de Hueck Doherty, for example *Poustinia* (London 1977), p. 89 and 'Pregnant with God' in : *Restoration* xxxi 12 (1978), p. 2.

THE PRAYER OF THE HEART IN SYRIAC TRADITION

The crossing of boundaries

It is a remarkable fact that a number of writings on the spiritual life are far more widely read and exert a much greater influence today than was ever the case during the lifetime of their authors. That this is not simply a consequence of the invention of printing can be seen from one particularly striking nineteenth-century example, *The Way of the Pilgrim*, which only achieved its totally unexpected popularity in its English translation, first published in 1930. Writings such as this, indeed, tend to have a delightfully disconcerting way of transcending the boundaries, not only of time and space, but also of language, culture and ecclesiastical allegiance. A notable instance here is provided by the works of an obscure seventh-century monk living in the remote mountains on the borders between modern Iraq, and Iran, who wrote in Syriac, and who belonged to a Church considered heretical by the rest of Christendom—works which nevertheless have exercised a considerable influence, in Greek and Arabic translations, on recent monastic revivals in both the Greek Orthodox Church (on Mount Athos) and the Coptic Orthodox Church (in the Nitrian desert between Cairo and Alexandria),¹ not to mention the reasonably wide readership they have had among Western Christians, thanks to a somewhat awkward English translation made in 1923 by the Dutch orientalist A. J. Wensinck.²

The reason why such a writer as St Isaac of Nineveh, far removed from us in time and space, should none the less still have an appeal among modern readers is not far to seek. Since the Christian can be understood as living simultaneously in two different dimensions, in sacred as well as in ordinary time and space, wherever the concern is with matters of the spirit, where sacred time and space are operative, the gap in historical time and geographical space that may exist between a particular writer or group of writers and the present day is without any real importance. For where sacred time and space are concerned, what is relevant is the quality of *what* goes on, not where or when it goes on. That is why writings on the Prayer of the Heart, no matter whether they date from the fourth or the fourteenth century, whether they come from Greece, Iraq, or Russia, are equally relevant to the Christian in twentieth-century England, seeing that they concern a subject which touches on the very essence of our existence.

The location of the heart in sacred space

As far as the topic of the Prayer of the Heart is concerned the concept of sacred space happens to be of more immediate importance than that of sacred time, for we are dealing with what might be called the 'geography of

the spirit'. What is the map of this world like? In particular, whereabouts is this heart, where prayer takes place, to be found, and where is it located? We are of course asking the wrong question first for, as we have just seen, with sacred space it is the content which locates things, and not their position in ordinary space. Thus, to anticipate a little, we shall discover that this 'heart', where the prayer of the heart takes place, is to be found wherever there is purity of heart. Accordingly we should begin by asking what is this heart? We should at once avoid thinking of it as being the same thing, let alone in the same place, as our physical heart. Long before medical science discovered the physiological importance of our physical heart, the Israelites had been talking of the heart as the centre of our whole being, and the seat, not only of the emotions (as it still remains for us in the popular usage), but also of the intellect, of thought and the will. We have moved this aspect up to the head, and so we get the dichotomy of the heart versus the head, feeling versus reason. For the Hebrews this tension was less marked, seeing that both feeling and reason were understood to originate in the same place, the heart. This all has some important consequences for the later history of Christian spirituality which I should touch on briefly here.

The heart and the mind

Early Christian writers on the spiritual life were heirs to both Semitic and Greek cultures, and each writer has his own individual admixture of elements from each of these traditions.³ It so happened that there was some Greek backing, among the Stoics, for the Semitic concept of the heart as the seat of the intellect, but for the Platonic and Neoplatonic tradition this is not the case, and Christian writers in this tradition—above all 'Dionysius the Areopagite'—show little or no interest in the heart as the centre of the spiritual life, speaking instead of the *nous*, the mind or intellect (though the Greek term covers rather more than either of these English words imply).

Wherever the influence of the Dionysian writings was strong (and it was strong in both East and West, but above all in the West), the heart is not an important location in the spiritual geography of the human being. It has become separated on this map of sacred space from the intellect (and in some cases more or less replaced by it). This is why, in the Western Christian tradition, 'prayer of the heart' usually has a somewhat narrower sense than it has in most of the Eastern Christian tradition, for in the West the heart is simply the seat of emotions, of affective prayer, whereas in the East it has (among certain writers at any rate) retained its biblical role of being the seat of the intellect as well.

A passage from St Bernard's Commentary on the Song of Songs very neatly illustrates the dichotomy that has taken place in the sacred geography of the medieval West: 'There are two kinds of contemplation', he writes, 'one seated in the intellect, the other in the heart's disposition; the one is accompanied by light, the other by warmth; the one consists in perception, the other in devotion'.⁴ Popular usage today simply reflects this division described by St Bernard: we speak of the mind being 'illuminated', but the heart being 'set on fire.'

The spirituality of the prayer of the heart, then, is going to be richest wherever it is at its most biblical, that is to say, wherever the 'heart' is regarded as the focal point of *every* aspect of the 'inner person', as St. Paul calls it (Rom. 7:22), the focal point of the intellect as well as of the emotions and feelings—just as for us today the heart has also become the focal point of our *physical* existence, of the 'exterior person', as well. Indeed the fact that the single term 'heart' can nowadays be used to refer to the focal points of the two different modes of our existence, of both our physical and our spiritual being, might almost be termed providential, for the ancient Hebrew writers, who first used the term 'heart' metaphorically, certainly had no conception of the physiological importance of the heart. There is in fact a great advantage in having this single term to denote the central point of these two modes of existence, for it serves to emphasise the 'wholeness' of the human person, constituted out of body and soul: the 'heart' of the inner man is also the heart of the outer man; neither heart can function properly without the other. Just as modern medical practice is apt to overlook the fact that many illnesses are psychosomatic, so too writers on the spiritual life (and especially those in the Platonic tradition) are apt to forget the other side of the coin, that we have a body as well as a soul; and after all it was the 'body' and not the soul which St Paul (1 Cor. 6:19) described as the 'temple of the Holy Spirit within you'. It is not a case of body versus soul, but of body *and* soul: the 'heart' is doubly the centre of the psychosomatic entity that makes up the human person.

How important it is for the *whole* person to be involved in prayer is indicated by the eighth-century East Syrian writer Symeon:

Prayer in which the body does not toil by means of the heart, and the heart by means of the mind, together with the intellect and the intelligence, all gathered together in deep-felt groaning, but where instead prayer is just allowed to float across the heart, such prayer, you should realise, is just a miscarriage, for while you are praying, your mind is drawing you away to some other business that you are going to see to after praying. In such a case you have not yet managed to pray in a unified manner.⁵

The interior heart

Headlines about heart-transplants and other wonders of modern medicine should not lead us to forget about the existence of this other 'interior' heart, and to suppose that it is only the physical heart that is of importance and relevance in twentieth-century society, for this 'interior heart' has by no means disappeared from *homo sapiens* in the course of human evolution over the last two thousand years; it is still capable of having miracles, even more wonderful than heart-transplants, performed upon it, since it is not a human surgeon who is operating, but the Holy Spirit himself. At the other end of the scale, however, there is always the ever-present danger that this 'interior heart' could atrophy through neglect.

The importance of this other heart lies in the fact that it is the innermost point of our being—unlocatable in space—where contact with God is possible. In the Psalter (Ps. 27 : 8) it is the heart which speaks to God, and since prayer, according to one definition, is 'conversation and encounter with God'⁶ then 'prayer of the heart' is basically nothing other than deep communication between the centre of our being and God.

That the heart is the place where prayer takes place is strikingly brought out by the fourth-century Syriac writer Aphrahat, 'the Persian Sage', as he is sometimes called. Aphrahat, who lived in what is today Iraq, has the distinction of having been the earliest Christian writer to have written a work on prayer in general (as opposed to the Lord's Prayer). In the course of this short treatise he offers an intriguing interpretation of Christ's words, 'Enter the chamber and pray to your Father in secret' (Matt. 6 : 6). Aphrahat comments :

Why, my beloved, did our Saviour teach us saying, 'Pray to your Father in secret, with the door shut? I will show you, as far as I am capable. He said 'Pray to your Father with the door closed'. Our Lord's words thus tell us 'pray in secret in your *heart*, and shut the door'. What is the door he says we must shut, if not your mouth? For here is the temple in which Christ dwells, just as the Apostle said, 'You are the temple of the Lord'—for him to enter into your inner self, into this house, to cleanse it from everything that is unclean, while the door, that is to say, your mouth, is closed. If this were not the correct explanation, how would you understand the passage? Suppose you happened to be in the desert where there was no house and no door, would you be unable to pray in secret? Or if you happened to be on the top of a mountain, would you not be able to pray?⁷

Thus the chamber to which Christ refers is no longer located somewhere in ordinary space, for it has been interiorised and transferred to sacred space.⁸

The functional importance of this interior heart is well brought out by St Isaac of Nineveh. He is answering the question, 'What is the difference between purity of mind and purity of heart?' :

Purity of mind is something other than purity of heart, just as there is a difference between a single limb of the body and the body as a whole. Now the mind is just one of the senses of the soul, whereas the heart controls all the inward senses : it is the senses' own sense, being their very root. Now if the root is holy, then so will all the branches be holy. But this is not the case if it is just one of the branches which is sanctified. The mind just needs a little familiarity with the Scriptures, and a little labour in the matter of fasting and stillness, for it to forget its former occupation and become cleansed, as long as it holds itself back from outside distractions. But it is equally easily defiled again.

The heart, on the other hand, is only purified through great afflictions, and by being deprived of all mixing with 'the world'; it also requires complete and utter mortification. But then, once it has been purified, its purity is not defiled by the touch of insignificant matters, nor is it afraid of severe struggles, for it has acquired a strong stomach that can easily digest all kinds of foods that weak minds find hard to cope with.⁹

For as the doctors say, 'A diet of meat that is difficult to digest makes a sound body all the stronger, since it is digested by an iron stomach'¹⁰

This 'purity of heart', then, can only be attained through 'great afflictions'. 'Afflictions' is a term frequently encountered in St Isaac's writings, and by it he seems to understand, not just the ascetic practices of the monastic life, but also all the tiresome externals of everyday life, and learning how to deal with them: in modern terms, all the things one would be only too glad to be rid of—household chores, endless interruptions, missed trains, flat tyres and so on, all the things we continually need to overcome by dint of trying to transfigure them through acceptance, and not allow them to reduce us to frustration, anger and resentment.

With St Isaac's reply in mind, the words of the Sermon on the Mount, 'Blessed are the pure in heart', take on a much deeper meaning and intensity. A 'pure heart' is what the psalmist prayed for; 'purity of heart' is a frequently expressed ideal in Syriac writers, for only it is capable of achieving 'pure prayer'.¹¹

There is actually another term, more or less synonymous with 'purity of heart' which is even more characteristic of Syriac writers: *shafyut lebba*, lucidity, limpidity, clarity, sincerity, purity, of heart—the term has several different connotations impossible to capture by a single English word. Like so many things in Syriac Christianity, the terminology goes back to Judaism, not indeed to the Hebrew or Greek Bible, but to the Aramaic interpretative translation known as the Targum. In the narrative of the sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22), for example (a chapter of key importance for Judaism), where the Hebrew speaks of Abraham and Isaac going up the mountain 'together', the Palestinian Targum draws out the spiritual perfection of the two patriarchs and renders the word 'together' as 'with a lucid heart'.¹² In the Syriac Gospels (Luke 8:15), it is those with this 'lucidity of heart' who not only hear the word which the sower sows, but also allow it to germinate and bear fruit. The use of the term here is interesting for another reason too, for the parable of the sower is also the source for a rather striking phrase connected with the interior heart which proved very popular with certain writers: 'the earth of the heart' (combining Matt. 13:19 and 23), where the word germinates. As we shall see later on, the 'word' has a *double entente*, for it is both the 'word of the Gospel' and God the Word.

In later Syriac writers 'lucidity of heart' is constantly stressed as the prerequisite for pure prayer: 'One thing really pleases God', says the eighth-century writer John the Elder, 'that the heart should be utterly lucid'.¹³

As will become apparent in due course, lucidity of heart is pleasing to God above all because it provides the means for his self-revelation to humanity.

The heart as altar

Aphrahat, like several other early Christian writers, speaks of prayer as an offering or sacrifice, a concept intimated in Psalm 140:2, and made explicit already in the Syriac Bible (Ben Sira 32 (35):8a). Aphrahat knows from biblical passages such as Elijah's sacrifice on Mount Carmel in 1 Kings 18:38, or David's in 1 Chronicles 21:26, that sacrifices acceptable to God were consumed by fire which descended from heaven, an idea which Aphrahat (along with Jewish tradition) extended to a number of other Old Testament sacrifices, such as that of Abel. Aphrahat uses a whole series of biblical examples of sacrifices to illustrate the need for purity of heart if prayer, which has now replaced sacrifice, is to be acceptable to God, insofar as God looks at the interior disposition of the offerer before responding with fire.¹⁴ Although Aphrahat himself does not go on to connect this fire from heaven directly with the prayer of the heart, this important development is to be found in some later Syriac writers, most notably perhaps in a seventh-century writer, Sahdona or Martyrios (the Greek form of his name). Sahdona develops this idea of prayer as a sacrifice and he emphasises the vital need for it to follow the biblical ordinances concerning sacrifices: that is to say, it should be spotless and without blemish, otherwise it will suffer the same fate as Cain's sacrifice, and be rejected. He continues:

So, provided the beginning of our prayer is watchful and eager, and with true feeling of the heart we soak our cheeks in tears, and our whole time of prayer is performed in accordance with God's will, then our prayer will be accepted in his presence, and the Lord will be pleased with us and find enjoyment in our offering, catching the sweet savour that wafts from the purity of our heart. And he will send the fire of his Spirit, which consumes our sacrifices and raises up our mind together with them in the flames heavenwards, where we shall behold the Lord—to our delight, and not to our destruction, as the stillness of his revelation falls upon us and the hidden things of knowledge of him are portrayed within us, while spiritual joy is granted in our heart, along with hidden mysteries which I am unable to disclose in words to the simple. In this way we establish our body as a living, holy and acceptable sacrifice which, in this rational service, is pleasing to God.¹⁵

What we have here is a dramatic internalisation of the Eucharistic liturgy. Instead of the bread and wine offered up by the Church, the Bride of Christ, here it is prayer that is the offering, made this time by the individual soul, which also is the Bride of Christ. This offering is made on the altar, not of the Church, but of the heart, and since there is no human priest to utter the epiclesis, God himself sends the 'fire of his Spirit' (phrasology reminiscent of St. Ephrem's eucharistic hymns),¹⁶ and raises the mind up to heaven as the fire receives and consumes the offering.

This parallelism between the transfiguring effect of 'pure prayer', and the transformation of the bread and wine into the Body of Blood of

Christ at the Eucharist, is a very important one. Syriac writers in the East Syrian mystical tradition of the seventh and eighth centuries in fact use the same technical term for the activity of the Holy Spirit upon the heart when pure prayer takes place as that employed in the eucharistic liturgy at the epiclesis. The word means something like 'overshadowing' (and corresponds to Greek *epiphotesis*). Significantly enough it is derived from the verb *aggen* which the Syriac New Testament uses in the Annunciation narrative at Luke 1:35, 'The Holy Spirit shall come upon you, and the power of the Most High shall *overshadow* you.'¹⁷

The heart, the Eucharist, and now Mary: this new association with the Annunciation introduces yet a further dimension to the theology of the prayer of the heart. In a whole number of different ways Syriac writers bring out the complementarity between the roles of Mary and the Eucharist in the course of salvation history.¹⁸ Mary is the essential meeting point between God and man in the process of the Incarnation, the descent of God to man, just as the Eucharist is the meeting point between man and God in the process of sanctification or (as Eastern tradition, Syriac as much as Greek, expresses it) the divinisation of man, the ascent of man to God. At the same time the sacraments (especially Baptism) continuously 'give birth' to Christians, just as Mary gave birth to Christ. In the sacraments the Holy Spirit's activity is assured; what is required is the assent, the co-operation, of the individual, corresponding to Mary's assent at the Annunciation. If that co-operation is given, then the individual Christian too will 'conceive'¹⁹ and Christ will shine forth from his or her heart, just as Mary conceived and Christ 'shone forth.'

*Theophanic prayer and the mirror of the heart*²⁰

Prayer, pure prayer, the product of purity of heart, thus has a theophanic effect: 'prayer reveals the depths of God's presence', writes an anonymous Syriac author;²¹ the climax of pure prayer is the revelation of Christ both *to* the heart and *in* the heart. It is important to note the need for the presence of 'true love' in this context: an eighth-century mystic, Abdisho the Seer, states:

True love [...] does not leave anything in your mind apart from the awareness of God which constitutes the spiritual key with which the inner door of the heart is opened—and inside is hidden Christ our Lord.²²

This theophanic aspect of prayer of the heart is brought out in another way, by means of the imagery of the mirror, always a popular one among Syriac writers.²³ It should be pointed out that mirrors in antiquity were not made of glass but of bronze, and so needed continual polishing if they were to serve their purpose effectively; 'polish this interior mirror of yours' is the repeated exhortation of Syriac writers from St Ephrem onwards. This idea of the mirror is often juxtaposed with the biblical teaching that man is created in the image of God. Since sin has marred this image, it will no longer reflect God properly if held up to the mirror of the heart; but

once this image is cleansed (and the potential for this is provided by the Holy Spirit at Baptism), then it will reflect the true likeness of the Creator. Three passages from a very fine writer, John the Elder (or 'the spiritual Sneikh', as he is known as in Arabic), whose letters have recently been published,²⁴ will illustrate some ways in which this imagery is employed. The first is in a letter addressed to 'him who is baptised in an utterly mysterious baptism, immersed in God who is hidden in a totally interior way'. In it John draws our attention once again to the profound meaning of the term 'pure in heart':

God reveals himself to a few, because of their diligence: these people fix their eyes within themselves, making themselves into a mirror in which the Invisible makes himself visible; they are drawn to this by God by means of the ineffable radiance which is extended to them and in them from his wondrous beauty, bearing witness to those words of God, 'Blessed are those who are pure in their heart, for they shall see God'²⁵

In another letter he writes :

Cleanse your mirror, and then without any doubt the triune Light will be manifested to you in it; place the mirror in your heart, and you will realise that your God is indeed alive.²⁶

The third passage reads :

You are the image of God, O man. Do you wish the image to take on the Likeness of its Model ? Then silence all activity of any kind and carry the yoke of your Lord in your heart and wonder at his majesty in your mind continuously, until the image becomes resplendent with his glory, and it is transformed into the Likeness, and you shall become in God a god who has acquired the likeness of his Maker by means of the union which makes like to himself.²⁷

Prayer, then, is a process by which God is revealed, reveals himself, to us; he is to be seen in the 'image' which, when cleansed and bright, acts as the mirror by which he is reflected. The aim of the Incarnation is the cleansing of this image in mankind so that God may then be revealed in each individual person; as Christians we thus have the awesome responsibility of being the vehicles of God's self-revelation in the world, a revelation that can only be achieved through this 'purity of heart'.

If a rapid descent from the sublime to the ridiculous may be excused, I would like to point to an apt modern illustration, taken from the kitchen, of what the Fathers understood by this process of cleansing the divine image in which we are created. This image, corrupted by sin, is like an exceedingly greasy saucepan which, with cold water, simply cannot be properly cleansed, however much you try: the provision of hot water and detergent corresponds to the provision of the grace of the Holy Spirit at Baptism: we are now in a position to clean the grease away, and the potential of a shining and bright clean saucepan is there. But it will not

just get clean of its own accord : to finish off the job we need to do some scrubbing ourselves. Co-operation between ourselves and the outside agency—whether it be the detergent and hot water in the kitchen, or the Holy Spirit in our lives as a whole is essential if progress is to be made.

Purity of heart as a state of prayer

Lucidity or purity of heart is not just the pre-requisite for 'pure prayer' of this theophanic nature : purity of heart can itself *constitute* prayer. Let us go back to Aphrahat in the fourth century. Abel's sacrifice was accepted, he says, because of his purity of heart, and this purity of heart, rather than the ensuing sacrifice, is what counts as prayer. In fact there are occasions, Aphrahat points out, when purity of heart definitely leads to action and not to conscious prayer :

Be careful, my beloved, that you do not let slip some opportunity of 'giving rest'²⁸ to the will of God by saying 'the time for prayer is at hand : I will pray and then act'—and while you are in the process of completing your prayer, that opportunity for 'giving rest' will disappear; you will thus be incapacitated from doing the will and 'rest' of God, and it will be through your prayer that you will be guilty of sin. Rather, you should effect 'the rest' of God, and that will constitute prayer [...]. Suppose you happen to go on a long journey, and, parched with thirst in the heat, you chance upon one of the brethren; you say to him, 'refresh me in my exhaustion', and he replies 'I will pray and then come to your aid'. And while he is praying you die of thirst. Which seems to you the better : that he should go and pray, or alleviate your exhaustion ? Or again, suppose you go on a journey in winter and you meet rain and snow and become exhausted from the cold; if once again you run into a friend of yours at the time of prayer and he answers you in the same way, and you die of cold, what profit will his prayer have, seeing that he has not alleviated someone in trouble ?²⁹

Aphrahat thus makes it clear that purity of heart is no monopoly of the contemplative life : it is just as essential in the active life. In a short but profound work on prayer, the fifth-century writer John the Solitary states that prayer should specifically result in action :

When you recite the words of the prayer that I have written for you, be careful not just to repeat them, but let your very self *become* these words, manifesting themselves in you as deeds. For there is no advantage in the reciting unless the word actually becomes incarnate in you and becomes action, with the result that you are seen in the world to be a man of God.³⁰

We should notice that John's choice of wording once again draws attention to the links between the prayer of the heart and the Incarnation.

This passage from John the Solitary brings me to the last point I should like to make. John here speaks of 'repeating' the prayer, and earlier in the work he emphasises the need for the soul to be 'continuously filled

with the remembrance of God'. Now in modern usage the term 'prayer of the heart' is often understood as being synonymous with the Jesus Prayer, the repetition of the Name coupled with a short phrase. In this sense of the term Syriac spirituality seems to have had nothing quite comparable, although short repeated invocations (such as, I imagine, John the Solitary has in mind here) are not uncommon, especially in the East Syrian mystics of the seventh and eighth centuries. But even these do not necessarily contain the name of Jesus. John the Elder, for example, advises the use of the repeated words 'Abba, Abba' in times of fervour; for periods of dryness and emptiness the secret repetition of the words 'My God, grant me wisdom and strengthen me' are recommended.³¹

What, rather, would seem for them to constitute the characteristic feature of the prayer of the heart is the 'remembrance' or 'recollection' of God, the constant awareness of his presence, 'the practice of the presence of God', as Brother Lawrence calls it. Seen in this light, the 'prayer of the heart' once again turns out to be more a state or disposition, rather than any particular identifiable activity. It is, above all, a loving state of total awareness of God. This is the state where we allow God's presence in our heart to make itself felt, where we allow God to act within us, from the very centre of our innermost being. This divine activity within the human person will invariably have a transfiguring effect, though the nature and intensity of this 'transfiguration' will vary enormously. In very rare cases, such as with St. Seraphim of Sarov, it will be very dramatic in its external manifestation. Much more frequently it will act much more imperceptibly, gradually transfiguring the whole course of a person's life: this is what St. Isaac no doubt has in mind in the passage quoted earlier, where he speaks of the heart as the root from which the branches of our external life receive nourishment. No doubt we have all had the (very humbling) experience of meeting or coming across someone transfigured in this way; an obvious example of such a person in the world today would be Mother Teresa.

Moreover, where the prayer of the heart takes place, it is not only the individual who is transfigured, for in the eyes of his or her interior heart the whole of creation too is seen in a transfigured fashion.³² As Philoxenus, in the early sixth century, put it, 'when faith has come, even mean things appear glorious'.³³ Or, closer to home, one need only think of George Herbert's wonderful hymn 'Teach me, my God and King'.

Prayer of the heart, the disposition of constant loving awareness of God, stemming from purity of heart, is quite definitely not just an ideal for those living a contemplative life. It is equally an ideal for each individual Christian, whatever his or her situation may be, seeing that this is one of the means by which God chooses to reveal himself in the world. Mother Teresa's words on her visit to Corrymeela are singularly apposite in this context: 'holiness is not just for the few, it is the duty of you and me.'

A hint of the awe and wonder that surrounds purity of heart is given in a passage from Sahdona's *Book of Perfection*. It provides us with an appropriate conclusion:

Blessed are you, O heart that is lucid, the abode of the Divinity; blessed are you, heart that is pure, which beholds the hidden Essence. Happy are you, O flesh and blood, the dwelling place of the Consuming Fire: happy are you, mortal body made out of dust, wherein resides the Fire that sets the worlds alight. It is truly a matter for wonder and astonishment that he, before whom the heavens are not pure, who puts awe into his angels, should take delight and pleasure in a heart of flesh that is filled with love for him, that is open wide to him, that is purified so as to act as his holy dwelling place, joyfully serving and ministering to him in whose presence thousand upon thousand, ten thousand upon ten thousand fiery angels stand in awe, ministering to his glory. Happy is the man of love who has caused God—who is love—to dwell in his heart. Happy are you, O heart, so small and confined, yet you have caused him, whom heaven and earth cannot contain, to dwell spiritually in your womb, as in a restful abode. Happy that luminous eye of the heart which, in its purity, clearly beholds him, before the sight of whom the seraphs veil their faces [.....]. Blessed indeed are the pure in heart.³⁴

NOTES

1. See O. F. A. Meinardus, 'Recent developments in Coptic monasticism', *Oriens Christianus* 49 (1965), pp. 79-89, and 'The hermits of Wadi Rayan', *Studia Orientalia Christiana : Collectanea* 11 (1966), pp. 294-317 (p. 304 for St. Isaac),
2. *Mystic Treatises by Isaac of Nineveh* (Amsterdam 1923; reprinted Wiesbaden 1969). there is a new translation, by the Monastery of the Transfiguration (Brookline); 1984. On St Isaac see also my 'St Isaac of Nineveh and Syriac spirituality', *Sobornost* 7:2 (1975), pp. 79-89 (chapter 10, below), and 'St Isaac of Nineveh', *The Way* 21 (1981), pp. 68-74.
3. On the importance of the heart in early Christian spirituality see A. Guillaumont, 'Le coeur chez les spirituels grecs à l'époque ancienne', *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* 2. 2281-8.
4. St Bernard, *On the Song of Songs* 49 (PL 183 : 1018).
5. Ed. A. Mingana, *Early Christian Mystics* (Woodbrooke Studies 7 (1934), p. 58 (tr.), p. 313 (text). Translation mine.
6. Thus in an anonymous work on prayer in British Library Add. 14535 f. 22a. The definition is based on Evagrius, *On Prayer* 3. 'Prayer is the converse of the mind with God.'
7. *Demonstration* 4.10 (*Patrologia Syriaca* i. 157-60). An English translation of Aphrahat's work on Prayer is given in my *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer* (1987). ch. 1.
8. Such an interpretation of the 'chamber' is of course by no means confined to Aphrahat : it already occurs in Origen's treatise *On Prayer*, and was subsequently adopted by (among others) St Ephrem in the East and St Ambrose in the West.
9. In biblical and patristic language the interior heart not only has a stomach, as in this passage, but also a face, eyes, and even — in the prayer of repentance of king Manasseh which forms part of the Greek Bible — knees as well.
10. Ed. Bedjan, p. 29 (= tr. Wensinck, p. 20).
11. 'Pure Prayer' is a phrase which is already found in the Syriac Bible (1 Chron. 16:42). though it is absent from the Hebrew, the Greek and other versions.

12. There is some reflection of this in homilies on Gen. 22 by the Syriac poets Narsai, and Jacob of Serugh. For the term 'limpidity' see G. Bunge, *Le lieu de limpidite. Irenikon* 55 (1982). pp. 7-18.
13. Letter 51.14 (in *Patrologia Orientalis*) 39 [1978]).
14. Aphrahat, *Dem.* 4.2-3.
15. Sahdona, *Book of Perfection* ii.8.20 (ed. A. de Halleux, *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* 252-3).
16. Especially *Hymns on Faith* 10, translated by R. Murray in *Eastern Churches Review* 3 (1970), pp. 142-50.
17. On the use of this term in Syriac (and its Jewish Aramaic background) see my 'Passover, Annunciation and Epiclesis', *Novum Testamentum* 24 (1982), pp.222-33.
18. The following is borrowed from my 'Mary and the Eucharist: an oriental perspective', *Sobornost/ECR* 1 : 2 (1979), p.58, (= Chapter 4, above)
19. For St Symeon the New Theologian's striking use of this idea see 'Mary and the Eucharist', pp. 58-9; earlier it is found in the *Macarian Homilies* (ed. Berthold), *Logos* 18.6.12. 27.1.7. In medieval Western tradition it occurs above all in the writings of Meister Eckhart, while in modern times it has been taken up notably by Catherine de Hueck Doherty.
20. I borrow the term 'theophanic prayer' from H. Corbin's *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi* (London 1969), p.246.
21. British Library Add. 14535 f-23a; *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer*, p.171.
22. Ed. Mingana, *Early Christian Mystics*, p.166 (tr.) p.275 (text).
23. For its use in patristic Greek spiritual see A. Louth. *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition* (Oxford 1981). pp.79-80. 91-3.
24. By R. Beulay in *Patrologia Orientalis* 39 (1978)), with French translation.
25. *Letter* 14.1-2.
26. *Letter* 28.2.
27. *Letter* 29.1.
28. Aphrahat is alluding to Isaiah 23 : 12 : 'This is rest : give rest to the weary'.
29. *Demonstration* 4.15.
30. Published in *Journal of Theological Studies* ns. 30 (1979), pp. 84-101 (quotation on pp. 99-100.).
31. *Letter* 36.6-7.
32. St Isaac of Nineveh has a famous passage on this subject (see 'St Isaac and Syriac spirituality', p. 71).
33. E.A.W. Budge, *The Discourses of Philoxenus* (London 1894) ii. p. 50 (Discourse 3).
34. *Book of Perfection* ii. 4.9, 8.

We tend to think of theology as the preserve of academics, a rather cerebral affair at the best of times. Evagrius, however, has a famous aphorism :¹ “If you are a theologian, you will pray in truth; if you pray in truth, you will be a theologian”. The theologian is someone who prays in truth. His theology can be expressed in all sorts of different ways—in words, in art, in music, in his very style of life. Thus we should not be surprised to find good theology in the work of poets who pray in truth. I would like to illustrate this, using the example of one particular poet, who impresses me as a really creative theologian (and one from whom I myself have learnt a very great deal). He died 1603 years ago, in what is to-day a small provincial town in south east Turkey, Urfa, but in his day was the spiritual centre of Syriac-speaking Christianity, Edessa, the home of king Abgar, who, according to early tradition, corresponded with Christ. His name is Ephrem, the numerical value of whose letters in Syriac is the same as that of ‘cross’ as he playfully points out on one occasion.²

St Ephrem has left a large body of religious poetry, some of it of very great beauty, and as a result of his enormous reputation in antiquity, many of his poems were translated into Greek, and so came to influence the great Byzantine liturgical poets, from Romanos onwards.

Ephrem is probably more like what we expect of a conventional theologian than many other great poet-theologians, in that he writes specifically religious poetry (certainly not a *sine qua non* of a poet-theologian) and he deals directly with wide areas of the subject. But he is certainly not a systematic theologian, or one who is continually seeking for definitions. Indeed, the search for precise definitions on topics that belong to areas beyond the experience and capacity of the human intellect is, in Ephrem’s eyes, something that only prying rationalists (in his case the Arians) indulge in, and their example should not be imitated. Had Ephrem lived half a century later, he would have witnessed how the church, in self-defence against these rationalist tendencies, had herself been forced to offer her own definitions on the various mysteries of the Incarnation.

If a label is required, ‘symbolic theology’ would be the least inappropriate designation of Ephrem’s approach. The freedom of this kind of theology from Greek modes of thought is striking, and it has been a particularly pleasing experience to discover how Ephrem’s un-Greek—and so, un-European—approach has a special appeal for African Christians.

My aim in this paper is to attempt to sketch out something of the framework of Ephrem's thought Central to the Christian mystery, for Ephrem, is always the utter paradox of God becoming man, the 'Great One who became small,' the 'Shepherd who became the lamb', the 'Farmer who became the grain of wheat' :.

The Mighty One entered, and put on insecurity
from Mary's womb; the Provisioner of all entered
—and experienced hunger; He who gives drink to all entered
—and experienced thirst; naked and stripped
there came forth from Mary He who clothes all.³

The precise nature of the 'mystery' (a favourite word of Ephrem's) of the Incarnation is totally beyond the probings of man, and can only be approached by means of the language of metaphor, and—most important—in the context of prayer and wonder. Poetry is thus the ideal tool for theology, enabling Ephrem to illuminate this, and many other tensions in Christianity, that are not susceptible to rational exposition or explanation.

Speaking in very broad terms, one can observe that in the history of Christianity two basically different approaches exist. One sees God and the 'holy' as immanent in the world, spilling over untidily, as it were, from the sacraments into the rest of life; the other seeks to *confine* the sphere of the 'holy' to certain restricted and well-defined areas (most obviously the sacraments), refusing to recognize it anywhere else; 'God on Sundays only, humanity is perfectly well in control the rest of the week, thank you'. In English literature something of the difference between these two approaches can be seen in the contrast between seventeenth and eighteenth century poetry; in Eastern Christianity the second approach is I believe essentially to be found in the Iconoclast movement,⁴ and later on in the opposition to Hesychasm. The former approach, which seems to me the only truly Christian one, is very much Ephrem's. As a notice outside Friends' House in London puts it: 'Don't put religion in a Sunday box. Let God and humanity spill around'.

The immanence of the holy in this world involves Ephrem in recognizing connections between everything; everything is of significance and has the potential of being a pointer to Christ: all that is required is the eye of faith to see these hidden links. The language in which Ephrem expresses the relationships between Christ and his two 'witnesses', scripture and the natural world, is that of typology. St Paul had already set the scene for this in the New Testament with his first Adam, second Adam typology, but with Ephrem typology is not longer just a system of biblical exegesis, but it has become a way of life. It is a means of contemplation, a continuous meditation on both the material world and the Bible, a meditation whose aim is essentially to include a sense of wonder and of awe, often providing a sort of 'ascent of the mind' by analogy as we can see in the following passage: meditating on the beauties of Paradise, Ephrem says:⁵

Although I was unworthy of the waves of its beauty,
 Paradise took me up and cast me into a yet greater sea.
 In its fairness I saw the saints who are far more beautiful than it,
 and I pondered: if Paradise be so glorious,
 how much more glorious Adam, who is the image of its Planter,
 and how much fairer the Cross that the Son of its Lord rode.

Typology can take place on two different planes, sometimes simultaneously: a horizontal plane, Old Testament—New Testament, and a vertical plane, this world—the heavenly world. What is hidden in the Old Testament is revealed in the New, what is revealed in the sacraments points to what is to us the hiddenness of God.

In his poetry Ephrem offers his readers a whole profusion of types and symbols. They are meant to serve as 'possible models', which are held up, and whose purpose is to make meaningful, and give insight into, some aspect of a mystery that cannot be fully comprehended by the human intellect. It is very much a subjective approach, since its value depends primarily on the meaning it imparts to each individual; and its fluidity, which will be abhorrent to someone brought up on nineteenth and twentieth-century biblical criticism, is an essential element, for once it has lost this, typology becomes fossilized and its value disappears. As a matter of fact, typology and modern biblical criticism are complementary, *not* conflicting methods of biblical interpretation, and they only come into conflict when exclusive claims (of a totally illegitimate nature) are made for the one at the expense of the other; here it is essential not to lose sight of the fact that they are operating in two quite separate modes of understanding.

Ephrem's typology is also mythopoetic: it flourishes in a luxuriant garden of Christian mythology: Mary conceives through her ear, for example, for reasons which will be clear from the following:⁶

Just as death's poison entered in and was
 poured out in that small womb of Eve's ear,
 so too did Salvation enter in to that new ear
 of Mary's, to be poured out there.

To the historically-minded, this again will appear abhorrent, but Ephrem is not concerned with history; rather, following the example of all peoples and cultures in the history of mankind, he uses mythology as a means of expressing something of a reality, the full comprehension of which lies beyond the bounds of human experience and understanding.

Types and symbols are not simply pointers, for to Ephrem 'the symbol contains within itself the actual presence of that which it symbolizes'⁷—a view by no means confined to Ephrem, but one common to the Fathers, leading to an essentially sacramental view of the world. Thus we can find Ephrem speaking of Tamar as stealing from her father-in-law Judah 'the Medicine of Life' (a frequent title of Christ) 'that lay on his person'.⁸

This understanding of the nature of symbols is intimately tied up with Ephrem's conception of the nature of time. In what one might call our 'overdeveloped' western Christianity, we have more or less lost consciousness of another dimension of time, alongside ordinary, linear, historical time. This other dimension of time is usually known as 'sacred', or 'liturgical' time. All moments in ordinary linear time, whose salvific content is the same, converge to a single point in sacred time. This rather compact statement is best illustrated by a practical example: a liturgical feast and the particular salvific event that it commemorates, though far separate in historical time, can, in sacred time, come together. This helps explain why liturgical poetry so often starts "*Today* is Christ born, etc." I should stress that this concept of sacred time is not a piece of eastern mystification; anthropologists recognize it as common to all religions,⁹ and it is by no means confined to oriental Christianity (it was once just as much present in western). The effect of all this in Ephrem's poetry can best be seen when Ephrem is talking about the eucharistic or baptismal liturgy.

To Ephrem, Christ 'opens up' Christian baptism at his own baptism in the river Jordan. Thus, addressing the river itself, Ephrem says:¹⁰

How blessed are your streams that were purified at the descent
of the Holy One, who condescended to wash in you.
When he went down to be baptized,
he opened up baptism for the forgiving of souls.

Seen from the point of view of historical time, this is illogical, since it anticipates the death and resurrection of Christ. Ephrem is, nevertheless, very well aware of the Pauline teaching on baptism, and for him Christ's baptism in the Jordan, together with the Nativity and Passion and Resurrection, form a single salvific unit, a single moment as it were in sacred time, which can be localized as a whole at any of these points in historical time—Nativity, Baptism, Passion or Resurrection.¹¹

But sacred time has a further role to play here for Ephrem. At Christ's entry into the river Jordan, the waters went up in flames, according to an early Syriac tradition. This was seen as an indication that the Jordan, as representative to all baptismal water in future, had been consecrated. At every Christian baptism thereafter the invocation of the Holy Spirit, in the prayer of consecration for the baptismal water, effects an entry into sacred time, and the consequent bringing together, in sacred time, of that particular celebration of Christian baptism with Christ's own baptism in Jordan—however far apart they might be in historical time. The water in the font is effectively now the same as the water of the Jordan after Christ had entered it. This will explain, incidentally, why in several eastern rites the font is actually called 'the Jordan'.

An analogous entry into sacred time is to be found very obviously in the eucharistic liturgy, again effected by the working of the Holy Spirit. Whereas in baptism the chain of salvific events wrought by the Incarnation as a whole are all focused on Christ's baptism, in the Eucharist the focus

shifts to the Last Supper and Passion. Each celebration of the liturgy is thus a representation of the meal in the Upper Room, and at the same time of the Passion itself—something very much more than just a memorial of it. Speaking of the Fraction of the consecrated bread Ephrem says;¹²

At that moment when his sacred body is broken, then we recall
his immolation:

Let all the limbs of the body tremble at the moment of the immolation of the Only-Begotten.

The Fraction is not just the recalling of Christ's immolation, it merges into it in sacred time.

In another passage Ephrem describes the Eucharist as the 'spiritual bread which becomes for everyone an eagle that conveys them to Paradise.'¹³ Baptism, culminating in the Syrian rite with the Eucharist, is seen by Ephrem precisely as an entry into Paradise, into the kingdom of heaven 'We have eaten Christ's body in place of the fruit on the Tree of Paradise, and his altar has taken the place of the garden of Eden for us; the curse has been washed away by his innocent blood, and in the hope of the resurrection we await the life that is to come, and indeed we already walk in this new life, in that we already have the pledge of it'.¹⁴ The tension between sacred and historical time here is very obvious: as far as sacred time is concerned, the baptized person is already in the kingdom of heaven, he eats the bread of angels. In historical time, however, he is of course very much still on earth, assailed by temptations, by 'the party of the tares', as Ephrem sometimes puts it. Yet the kingdom of heaven is within him, the potential for continually entering it is there, effected by the Holy Spirit. 'Do not constrain the Spirit', said Paul (Ephesians 4:30); the corollary for Ephrem is: *allow* the Holy Spirit to effect for you this entry into sacred time at every moment of your life. Ephrem realizes that the Christian must seek to achieve a continuous *metanoia*, turning of the mind, a perpetual revolution in his life, ceaselessly striving to make sacred and historical time effectively one as far as he or she is concerned. Ephrem's poetry is ever urging his readers and hearers to pray 'may your kingdom come' with fervour.

There is one other area where sacred time plays a vital role in Ephrem's poetry. One of his favourite themes is the descent of Christ into the underworld, an article of the creed that many people to-day find abhorrently mythical. Actually, once one has recaptured the importance of sacred time, the Descent can be seen in its proper perspective, and it turns out to play an essential role in the Church's understanding of the Incarnation, and her proclamation of its effects.

Because the Incarnation took place in historical time, and at a particular place, its effects are limited by time (in that it cannot work in retrospect) and by space (in that it took place in Palestine). This scandal of particularity is obviated precisely by the Descent and, in Syriac tradition, the baptism of Adam.

The Descent takes place in sacred, not historical, time, and so it brings the effects of the Incarnation to all who live before the Incarnation took place in historical time, and to all, presumably, to whom the Christian gospel never reaches in space. Because the meaning of the Descent is concerned with something outside historical time, there is no alternative to describing it in mythic terms—and mythology, as pointed out earlier, has always been man's means of expressing his understanding of divine reality and what is essentially undescribable in rational terms.¹⁵ I tried to stress earlier that the strength of typology lay precisely in its fluid and subjective character: its value depends entirely on the response of each individual. But at the same time, the mysteries to which the types and symbols point have their stable objective existence. We find exactly the same sort of tension in Ephrem's understanding of the meaning of biblical inspiration. Like all the Fathers, he of course believes that the biblical writers were inspired, but what matters just as much to him is that the individual reader of the scriptures should be equally open to the Holy Spirit's inspiration. A passage in Ephrem's Hymns on Paradise illustrates very well this wonderfully dynamic view of inspiration—the Holy Spirit working through scripture *and* the individual who reads or hears it. Ephrem is here describing his own experience of reading the opening verses of the paradise narrative in Genesis.¹⁶

I read the opening of the book, and was full of joy,
for its verses and lines spread out their arms to welcome me;
the first rushed out and kissed me, and led me on to the next,
and when I reached that line where the story
of Paradise is written, it lifted me up
and transported me
from the bosom of the book to the very bosom of Paradise.

Elsewhere Ephrem illustrates how essential it is for the individual to respond to the prompting of the Holy Spirit, by means of the analogy of the effect of light on the eye: Mary is the model of someone who allows the light to enter her eye, and so she is able to see clearly, and at the same time to radiate that light (which is, of course, on one level identical with Christ). Her opposite is Eve, who allows her eye to be darkened, so becoming spiritually blind herself, and at the same time casting darkness on all around. Ephrem playfully treats Eve and Mary as the left and right eyes of the world:¹⁷

The world, you see, has two eyes fixed in it:
Eve was its left, blind,
while the right eye, bright, is Mary.

Through the eye that was darkened the whole world was darkened,
and men groped and thought that every stone
that they stumbled upon was a god, calling falsehood truth.

But when the world was illumined by that other eye and the
heavenly Light that resided in its midst, men became reconciled
once again with God, realizing that what they had stumbled on was
destroying their very life.

The choice to whether we allow the light to enter our eyes is entirely up to us.

Everything thus depends on the response of the individual. This is the exercise of man's freewill: is he going to allow the grace of the Holy Spirit to work within him, or is he going to 'constrain' it? It is, as Ephrem stresses, an awe-inspiring responsibility. In this sort of context we can see the importance of the symbols of water and fire in Baptism and in the Eucharist. In themselves these elements are ambiguous, they can be destructive or life-giving; the 'fire' of the Holy Spirit, which for Ephrem enters the baptismal font and the bread and wine at their consecration, retains something of this ambiguous character, in that it is just as much the fire of judgement which consumes those who treat these mysteries with contempt.

The awe that all this inspires in Ephrem can be seen from the following stanzas from a beautiful hymn on the Incarnation, the Holy Spirit and the Sacraments :¹⁸

In your bread there is hidden the Spirit who is not consumed,
in your wine there dwells the Fire that is not drunk :
the Spirit is in your bread, the Fire in your wine,
a manifest wonder, that our lips have received...

The seraph could not touch the fire's coal with his fingers,
but just brought it close to Isaiah's mouth :
the seraph did not hold it, Isaiah did not consume it,
but us our Lord has allowed to do both...

Fire descended in wrath and consumed sinners ;
the Fire of mercy descended and dwelt in the bread.
Instead of that fire which consumed mankind,
you have consumed Fire in the bread and you come to Life.

Fire descended and consumed Elijah's sacrifices ;
the Fire of mercies has become a living sacrifice for us.

Fire consumed the oblation ;
we, Lord, have consumed your Fire in your oblation.

The transformation in the bread and wine effected by the descent of the consecrating fire of the Holy Spirit serves Ephrem as a model for other potential transformations in the material world that can be effected by means of man's co-operation with the Holy Spirit,¹⁹ transformations not only in ourselves, but also in the material world around us, effected by means of the use to which we put things.

I have tried in this paper, all too inadequately I fear, to put across something of St Ephrem's way of looking at things : the total invasion of theology into ordinary, everyday, life, cultivating an attitude of praise and wonder that allows the Holy Spirit to bring about in each one of us the kingdom of God.²⁰ What is essential, Ephrem realizes, is our response, our allowing the Holy Spirit to work within us, allowing him to remove the scales from our eyes,²¹ so that we can see the transfigured

Christ and through him, the world transfigured. Curiously enough, St Ephrem never seems to refer to the Transfiguration, but much of his poetry is a marvellous commentary on the meaning and implications of this feast. Perhaps I might end with an extract from a poem where St Ephrem puts the Eucharist into the context of another mountain theophany :²²

Our mouth is too small to give thanks,
 our tongue inadequate to utter blessing,
 for he, to whom the very heavens are small,
 became small himself, giving himself to be confined in our
 hands.

Mount Sinai, on which he descended,
 gave a great thunder crash in trepidation ;
 that power, which overawed the mountain,
 our very fingers grasp and hold.

Earth, sea and sky are contained
 as it were in the palm of God's hand,
 yet man's feeble mouth, tiny by comparison,
 is sufficient to hold him !

NOTES

1. PG 79, col. 1180B
2. *Hymns on Virginity*, 21.8. For available English translations of Ephrem's works, see the bibliographical note at the end of my *The Harp of the Spirit : Poems of St Ephrem* (Studies Supplementary to Sobornost, no 4; 2nd ed 1983), and my *The Luminous Eye. : The spiritual World Vision of St Ephrem* (Rome, 1985).
3. *Hymns on the Nativity*, 118 (The whole poem will be found in *The Harp of the Spirit*, no 5).
4. See my 'Iconoclasm and the Monophysites', in *Iconoclasm* (ed A. Bryer and J. Herrin; Birmingham, 1976).
5. *Hymns on Paradise*, 6.5.
6. *Hymns on the Church*, 49.7.
7. This is the definition of P. Evdokimov, 'The Vision of Beauty: the Bible, the Fathers, and the Icon' in *Christian*, vol. 3, no 3 (1976), p. 227.
8. *Hymns on the Church*, 11.4 (Genesis 38).
9. See in particular the various works of Mircea Eliade, e.g. *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (1958), p. 391 ff.
10. *Hymns on Virginity*, 15.3.
11. For a poem where dramatic use is made of the concept of sacred time, see my 'St Ephrem on Christ as Light in Mary and in the Jordan : Hymni de Ecclesia 36' *Eastern Churches Review* VII.2 (1976), pp. 137-44.
12. *Hymnes de Saint Ephrem conservées en version arménienne* (Patrologia Orientalis XXXI; 1961) no 49 (p. 227).
13. *Hymns on Unleavened Bread*, 17.12.
14. *Commentary on the Diatessaron*, 21.25. See also my 'World and Sacrament in the writings of the Syrian Fathers', *Sobornost*, ser. 6 no 10 (1974), pp. 685-96, (chapter 1 above).

15. An example of one of Ephrem's Descent hymns will be found in *The Harp of the Spirit*, no 7.
16. *Hymns on Paradise*, 5.3. (For the whole poem, see *The Harp of the Spirit*, no. 2).
17. *Hymns on the Church*, 37.5-7.
18. *Hymns on Faith* 10.8, 10, 12, 13. (For an English translation of the whole poem, see R. Murray, 'A hymn of St Ephrem to Christ on the Incarnation, the Holy Spirit and the Sacraments', *Eastern Churches review* iii, (1970), pp. 142-50.
19. see also 'World and Sacrament ...', pp. 692-3.
20. Praise, for Ephrem, is the whole aim of our creation; if we fail in this, we are as good as already dead. See *The Harp of the Spirit*, nos 1 and 10 in particular.
21. I gratefully borrow the imagery from a sermon given during the course of the liturgy by Fr. Benedict Ramsden on the day this paper was given at the Fellowship Conference, the eve of the Transfiguration.
22. Armenian hymns no 47 (p. 221).

THE MYSTERIES HIDDEN IN THE SIDE OF CHRIST

The lance which reopens Paradise

When St Ephrem reaches John 19:34 in his *Commentary on the Diatessaron*, 'one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a lance, and at once there came forth 'blood and water', he breaks out into lyrical prose and exclaims:

I ran to all your limbs, and from them all I received every kind of gift. Through the side I pierced with the sword I entered the garden fenced in with the sword. Let us enter in through that side which was pierced, since we were stripped naked by the counsel of the rib that was extracted. The fire that burnt in Adam, burnt him in that rib of his. For this reason the side of the second Adam has been pierced, and from it comes a flow of water to quench the fire of the first Adam.¹

And a little further on he continues: "There came forth blood and water": that is, his church, which is built on his "side": just as in the case of Adam, his wife was taken from his side, Adam's wife being his "rib", so our Lord's "blood" is his church. From Adam's rib issued death, from our Lord's rib life'.² Packed into these sentences is the essence of our subject, the mysteries hidden in our Lord's side.

This single verse, John 19:34, could be described as the focal point of early Syriac exegesis, looking back, as it does, to the Paradise narrative of Genesis, and forward to the new Paradise, the sacramental life of the Church. The typological associations of the verse are incredibly rich, and I shall merely try to draw out some of the most important facets.

The verse offers three main starting points for typological exegesis—the side, the piercing with the lance, and the blood and water which issued forth. The first two of these provide links with the past, while the last points forward to the future in the vast panorama of salvation history. The side of Christ looks back to Adam's side, his rib, from which Eve was miraculously extracted (Gen. 2:21); the lance likewise looks back to the cherub's revolving sword which excludes fallen mankind from Paradise (Gen. 3:24); the blood and the water, on the other hand, prefigure the Church and the sacraments, Baptism and the Eucharist. The piercing of the side of the second Adam effects the re-entry of mankind—the first Adam—into Paradise. 'There came forth from Him water and blood; Adam washed, revived and returned to Paradise', as Ephrem puts it in a hymn.² A sixth-century work known as *The Cave of Treasures* tells, in quaintly literalistic terms, exactly how this was effected: 'the blood and water (from the pierced side of Christ) came down into the mouth of Adam (buried,

according to early tradition, immediately beneath the cross), and Adam was delivered and put on the robe of glory (in other words, was baptized), and Christ wrote the edict of his return with his own blood, dispatching it (to the cherub guarding paradise) by the hands of the thief.⁴ Here in fact we have the background of the medieval iconography of the Crucifixion, with Adam's skull placed immediately below the Cross.

Before exploring any further the main strands of this astonishing spider's web of typology it should be pointed out that, because of the typological correspondences between the ' sword ' of Genesis and the ' lance ' of John, and between Adam's ' rib ' and Christ's ' side ', the same term may be used in either context. This can be seen at once in the following stanza from one of Ephrem's hymns on the Crucifixion (H. Crucif. IX. 2):

Happy are you, living wood of the Cross,
for you proved to be a hidden sword to Death;
for with that sword which smote him
the Son slew Death, when he himself was struck by it.
The sword that pierced Christ removed the sword guarding Para-
dise; his forgiveness tore up our document of debt.

The return to Paradise, which of course looks forward to the sacraments as well, is brought out in a beautiful manner in another hymn of Ephrem's (H. Nativ. VIII. 4):

Blessed is the Merciful one who saw the sword
beside Paradise, barring the way
to the Tree of life; he came and took himself
a body which was wounded so that, by the opening of his side,
he might open up the way into Paradise.

Christ's side and Adam's rib

As we shall see, the pierced side of Christ gives birth to the ' Bride ', the Church, and to the sacraments; for this the side, or ' rib ', of Adam, which gave birth to Eve, provides the Old Testament type. Jacob of Serugh, a Syrian Orthodox poet of the early sixth century, puts it as follows:

The Bridegroom's side has been pierced, and from it the Bride has
come forth,

fulfilling the type provided by Adam and Eve.

For from the beginning God knew and depicted

Adam and Eve in the likeness of the image of his Only-begotten;

He slept on the cross as Adam had slept his deep sleep,

his side was pierced and from it there came forth the Daughter
of light,

—water and blood as an image of divine children

to be heirs to the Father who loves his Only-begotten.

Eve in prophecy is the mother of all that lives--

what, if not baptism, is the mother of life ?

Adam's wife bore human bodies subject to death,

but this virgin bears spiritual beings who live for ever;

Adam's side gave birth to a woman who gives birth to immortals.
In the crucifixion he completed the types that had been depicted,
and the hidden mystery that had been covered revealed itself⁵

Here Jacob's interest lies essentially in the contrast between Eve and the Bride; in other passages, however, he is more concerned with the miraculous nature of the birth-giving, and consequently he introduces two further elements into the complex typological web. Adam's own miraculous birth from the virgin Earth, and Christ's virgin birth from Mary:

The virgin earth gave birth to Adam in holy fashion
so as to indicate clearly Mary's giving birth.
Adam in turn slept, and his side was pierced;
from it came forth Eve to be mother for the whole world,
serving as an image of that sleep of death on the cross
and of that side which gave birth to baptism.
Adam slept and gave the whole world a mother;
the Saviour died, and there flows from him baptismal water,
If the side gave birth to Eve, as is written,
then a virgin too gave birth to the Son, as is indicated.⁶

These, then, are some of the more important typological resonances contained by the verse, looking back to Adam and Eve and the Paradise narrative on the one hand, and to Christ's own miraculous nativity from Mary on the other; we are now in a position better to appreciate the forward-looking aspects of John 19:34. First of all we should pay attention to two details of the Gospel wording, the verb 'issue forth', and the word 'blood and water', both of which are often tacitly altered in order to bring out certain of the verse's associations. The matter of the word order is straightforward: since the Fathers regularly understand the 'water' as baptismal water, and the 'blood' as the Blood of the Eucharist, there is always a strong tendency to quote them in the order 'water and blood', rather than 'blood and water'.

The other point is more complex. Very frequently allusions to the verse speak of 'water and blood *flowing*', not 'issuing', from the side of Christ. The purpose of this alteration is to link the passage with a specifically Christological interpretation of John 7:37-87: instead of understanding the 'rivers of living water' as flowing from the Spirit-filled believer (following the more usual interpretation), several of the Fathers, both Greek and Syriac, punctuated the verse in a different way. 'If anyone thirsts, then let everyone who believes in me come to me and drink; as the scripture has said, "Out of His belly shall flow rivers of living water."' Thus for example, we find Jacob of Serugh speaking, in one of his letters, of the 'sheep' (that is to say, the baptized) gathering 'to drink the water that flowed from the Cross'.⁸ Rather less usual is the introduction of further wording from John 7:38 into references to John 19:34, such as we find in Jacob's homily on Ezekiel's Chariot. 'There surge forth in the land "rivers of living water" from the fountain that the sword pierced on Golgotha'.⁹ From another passage we shall discover that this 'fountain' is none other than the fountain of Paradise, the source of the four great rivers. (Gen. 2:10).¹⁰

It would be easy to get entangled in yet further typological associations that Jacob introduces, such as the fountain of water produced by the rock that was struck by Moses (Exod 17:6; Num. 20:10);¹¹ but we should extract ourselves so that we can consider some of the ecclesiological and eucharistic connotations of the pierced side.

The Bride from the side of Christ

Eve's birth from Adam is often contrasted with the birth of the Church, or of Baptism (more or less personified) from the side of Christ; as Jacob tersely puts it on one occasion: 'There flowed from his side the second mother, Baptism'.¹¹ Elsewhere he is more explicit:

Christ came and opened up Baptism on his Cross
so that it should be the 'mother of living things' in place of Eve.
Water and blood, for the fashioning of spiritual children, flowed,
and Baptism became the 'mother of living things.'¹³

It is interesting that one of the Syrian Orthodox baptismal services actually makes use of this set of references in its prayer for consecration of the water:¹⁴

(...) Sanctify the water, and instead of the womb of Eve which produced children who were mortal and corruptible, may this womb of water produce children who are heavenly, spiritual and immortal. And may your living and Holy Spirit come, O Lord, and dwell and rest upon this water, and sanctify it and make it like the water which flowed from the side of your Only-begotten one on the Cross.

The New Eve, who is born from the Second Adam's side, is sometimes described by Jacob as 'the Bride':

Christ slept on the cross, and Baptism came forth from him;
the Bridegroom slept, and his side was pierced in his sleep,
he gave birth to the Bride, as happened with Eve, in Adam his type.

The stillness of the sleep of death fell upon him on the cross,
and from him came forth the Mother who gives birth to all spiritual beings:

the Lord of Adam produced the New Eve in his sleep,
to serve as mother of the children of Adam, in Eve's place;
water and blood for the fashioning of spiritual babes
flowed from the side of that Living One who died, in order to bring life to Adam.

That Dead One who was alive showed forth a marvel after his death:
there flowed from him blood, to indicate that he was alive,
there flowed from him water, to show that he was dead;
and blood flowed too, to teach that he was alive, though dead.¹⁵

Marriage imagery is in fact common among Syriac writers in a baptismal context: baptism is the betrothal of the soul to Christ,¹⁶ and the Old Testament readily offers a suitable type in the betrothal of Rachel of Jacob at the well (Gen. 29):

Christ saw sin placed over the world's fountain
 so that the refreshing draught of Life could not be obtained by a man.
 Christ saw the Gentiles like sheep suffering from drought,
 with the fount of Life covered over by sin, as though by a rock.
 He saw the Church, like Rachel, and rejoiced at her presence, and
 he removed the weight of sin, heavy like the rock,
 opening up for his Bride the baptismal font that she might bathe
 therein.

In his *Commentary on the Diatessaron* (III. 17) Ephrem lists the various Old Testament betrothals by wells or water—of Rebecca, Rachel and Sipporah; all these, he says, were types of our Saviour who betrothed himself to the Church in the water of the Jordan'.¹⁸

The Jordan, Golgotha and the font

Jacob of Serugh in his poems on baptism also takes the betrothal of the Church back to Christ's own baptism, rather than the cross, our starting point. The contradiction is, however, only apparent, for with the Syriac writers (and above all Jacob) the twin fountain heads of Christian baptism are provided by Christ's own baptism *and* his pierced side on the cross: these two salvific events, separate in historical time, come together as a single unit in sacred time. Furthermore, when speaking in universal terms, it is the Church who is the Bride whose betrothal takes place at Christ's baptism and crucifixion, while at each Christian baptism it is the individual member of the Church who in turn becomes Christ's particular 'bride'.

Jacob can develop this sort of language in a very vivid manner:

The King's Son made a marriage feast in blood on Golgotha;
 there the Daughter of Day was betrothed to him, to be his,
 and the royal ring was beaten out in the nails of his hands;
 with his holy blood was this betrothal made.

He took her hand there, seeing that she had shown her love for
 him at the hour of his shame;
 he set her at his right hand, to be with him,
 he led her into the Garden—the bridal chamber he had prepared
 for her.¹⁹

Another such passage is to be found in his beautiful homily on Moses' veil:

From the baptismal water comes the chaste and holy union
 of Bride and Bridegroom, united in spirit in baptism.

Women are not joined to their husbands in the same way
 as the Church is joined with the Son of God.

What bridegroom dies for his bride, apart from our Lord?

What bride sought out a slain man to be her husband?

Who, from the beginning of the world, ever gave his blood as the
 wedding gift,

apart from the Crucified one who sealed the marriage with his wounds?

Who has ever seen a corpse placed in the middle of a wedding feast,

with the bride embracing it, waiting to be comforted by it?

At what wedding feast apart from this did they break the body of the bridegroom for the guests in place of other food?

Wives are separated from their husbands by death, but this Bride is joined to her Beloved by death!

He died on the cross and gave his body to the glorious bride, who plucks and eats it every day at his table;

he opened up his side and mixed his cup with holy blood, giving it her to drink so that she might forget her many idols.

She anointed him with oil, she put him on in the water, she consumed him in the Bread,

she drank him in the Wine, so that the world might know that the two of them were one.

He died on the cross, and she did not exchange him for another : she is full of love for his death, knowing that from it she has life.

Man and wife were the basis of this mystery,

they served as a picture and type and image for reality;

by means of them Moses uttered this great mystery,

covering up and preserving it under a veil so that it should not be laid bare;

the great apostle uncovered its beauty, and showed it to the world, and so Moses' words 'the two shall be one' stood illumined.²⁰

In both the Syrian Orthodox Church and in the Church of the East this theme of the Church as Christ's Bride is kept very much alive in the Office services.²¹ The following is taken from the Office of the last Sunday of the East Syrian liturgical year, known as the fourth Sunday 'of the Hallowing of the Church':

Give thanks, O Church, to the King's Son
who has betrothed himself to you, to be his Queen;
he has brought you into his marriage chamber,
making flow the blood from his side as the wedding gift,
clothing you in the glorious Robe of Light that does not fade away,
and placing on your head the radiant crown of glory.²²

The 'new wine' of Pentecost

Since the Eucharist is the culminating point of the Syriac baptismal services, when writers such as Jacob speak of the side of Christ 'giving birth to Baptism, the new mother', they will certainly have in mind the Eucharist as well as the baptismal water. Indeed the 'blood' was regularly given a Eucharistic interpretation, as we have already seen. Thus Philoxenus comments in a letter:

‘ There came forth blood and water ’: baptismal water together with the blood that brings absolution; by ‘ water ’ the font was indicated, by ‘ blood ’ the Holy Mysteries which cleanse us from sin every time we receive them.²³

In his homily on Pentecost Jacob of Serugh introduces a number of new dimensions, by bringing in references to Acts 2:13,²⁴ Pentecost and the alleged drunkenness of the disciples: as a matter of fact, he says, the mockers who held that they were ‘ filled with new wine ’ were not all that far off the mark, but they were wrong in supposing that the ‘ new wine ’ had been pressed out of ordinary grapes :

—for what ordinary wine could give such wisdom?

No, it was the Cross whose wine made them fervent in speech; from it they received a new kind of wisdom, that required no instruction.

It was this juice, which the Jewish people had trodden out on Golgotha,

that gave them fervour and taught them every tongue;

it was this ‘ new wine ’, which the side of God’s Son had caused to flow, that acted as their teacher, enriching them in what it imparted.²⁵

Or, as the Chaldean Breviary puts it: ‘ The sheep, saved by the pure Blood, became drunk with the wine that was pressed out by the sword ’.²⁶

This in turn introduces us to yet another area of typological imagery, particularly dear to Syriac writers : besides ‘ the Vine ’ (John 15), Christ is also seen as the ‘ Cluster ’ of grapes that Caleb brought back from the Promised Land (Num. 13:23), and as the ‘ Grape ’ in the cluster, in which blessing is hidden (Isaiah 65:8).²⁷ The following passage comes from another early Syriac poet, Cyrillona:

The Vine ripened in secret:

for thirty years did they wait.

The hungry heard, and came thronging,

Adam came running from the grave,

and Eve too turned up from Sheol,

the Church gathered together from the mountains,

the Gentiles collected from every quarter,

they beheld the Cluster hanging

from the top of the cross.

Golgotha became the vine-shoot

whence sweetness peered out:

with their lips did they receive his Blood,

with their hands did they pluck his Truth.

The Vine is Christ who came to us,

proferring us the Cluster in his love;

it bowed its head in joy,
 for the Cluster to be plucked,
 just as our Lord bowed his head
 before the slave who smote him;
 the vine-shoot gives forth no cry
 when the labourer cut it off,
 nor did Christ utter any word
 when Caiaphas sat in judgement.
 The sickle lops off the vine-shoot
 and streams of water flow,
 the sword pierced Christ
 and there flowed for us streams of mercy.²⁸

The Church, the Sacraments and Mary

Looking back at this complex typological web we can begin to see that, for the Syriac Fathers, the Church has primarily a twofold aspect: on the one hand it manifests itself in the sacraments, Baptism and the Eucharist, on the other it represents the totality of its individual members. The tension between these two different facets seems to me important and meaningful. To put the matter paradoxically: the Church, represented by the sacraments, is the means of sanctification of the Church, represented by her individual members. Expressed rather differently, the Eucharist, where the Holy Spirit sanctifies the wine and the bread, is the model for what should happen to the individual Christian: by his co-operation with the Holy Spirit, he should allow the Spirit to sanctify him too, so that he becomes an icon of Christ, just as the consecrated Bread and Wine are also the icon of Christ. The model here also happens to be the means.

But there is also another model available, this time of a person whose complete co-operation with the Holy Spirit effected the birth of God as Man. Mary, also the New Eve, fits in very closely with the typological web centred around John 19:34, and her role there corresponds in many ways with that of the Bride who issues forth from the side of Christ.²⁹ In other words, her role in the divine economy is on a par with that of the Church and the sacraments: she gives birth to Christ, they give birth to 'icons' of Christ: she is the New Eve in that she brings Christ into the world instead of sin, and the Church is also the New Eve in that she is the Bride who is born from the side of the Second Adam. Of course Mary is not identical with the Church, but she represents the model for the individuals who collectively constitute the Church; seen from this angle, she is the microcosm of the Church in its second aspect, as the collective of individual Christians, and at the same time she is the exemplar of what that Church should be.

The nature of the relationship between Mary's role and that of the Church and the sacraments is also illumined by the symmetrical process that the Syriac Fathers see behind the typology surrounding the side of Christ. The descent and miraculous birth of God into the world requires the

co-operation of an individual human being with the Holy Spirit; only then can the miraculous birth of the Sacraments from Christ's side effect the ascent of man to God. Mary's role is thus essentially to be seen as complementary to that of the Church and the sacraments in the process of the Divine Economy.

Expressed within this spectacular maze of typology are matters of great profundity.

I should like to conclude with two rather striking passages where Mary is brought into close association with the typology surrounding John 19:34; in these we go beyond the more conventional parallels and contrasts between the Old and the New Eve. The first passage comes from Jacob of Serugh, who, by his choice of words with specific biblical resonances, delicately expresses something of Mary's relationship to the mysteries hidden in Christ's side :

Mary is the 'new well', whence flowed the Living Waters;
though unpierced, she gave birth to abundant streams for the
thirsty world.³⁰

The second offers a very startling exegesis of Luke 2:35, Simeon's prophecy to Mary: 'a sword will pierce through your own soul also'.³¹ The harmony of the Gospels known as the Diatessaron evidently read the verse in a different way, with Mary as the subject of the verb: 'you shall cause a sword to pass through yourself.' In his *Commentary on the Diatessaron* (II:17) Ephrem breaks up the verse and offers several possible interpretations, of which the first is :

'You shall cause the sword to pass': the sword which guarded
Paradise because of Eve was removed by Mary.

Ephrem's condensed thought here is illuminated by Jacob of Serugh who says :

Through Mary the path to Eden, that had been shut, was trod
again; the serpent fled, and men could pass over to God.
Through Mary the cherub turned aside the sword, to guard no
more the Tree of Life (Christ), which had now given itself over to
be eaten.³²

But let St. Ephrem have the last word, with a passage reminiscent of our opening quotation :

From the rock water gushed forth for Jewish people who drank and
were strengthened.

From the wood on Golgotha the Fountain of Life gushed forth for
the gentiles.

By the edge of the sword was the way to the Tree of Life guarded,
but now the Lord of the Tree has given himself as food for the
Gentiles.

Whereas the first Adam was given the trees of Eden for food,
to us the Planter of Eden has himself become food for our souls.
We went forth from Paradise with Adam, when he left it,
but, now that that lance is removed by the other,
let us gird ourselves and enter.³³

NOTES

1. *Commentary on the Diatessaron*, XXI. 10.
2. *Ibid.*, XXI. 11.
3. *Nisibene Hymns*, XXXIX. 7.
4. E. A. W. Budge, *The Book of the Cave of Treasures* (London 1927), pp. 231-2.
5. P. Bedjan, *Homiliae Selectae Mar Jacobi Sarugensis* (Paris-Leipzig 1905-10), III 299-300.
6. Bedjan, III. 320.
7. Cp. R. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom* (Cambridge 1975), p. 213, and my 'The Epiklesis in the Antiochene Baptismal Ordines', *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 197 (1974), p. 211.
8. G. Olinder, *Jacobi Sarugensis Epistula* (C. S. C. O. 110, Scr. Syri 57), p. 240.
9. Bedjan, IV. 608; cf. III. 647.
10. Bedjan, II. 588-9.
11. Specifically compared to the side of Christ in Bedjan II. 588-9. Ephrem in his *Commentary on the Pauline Epistles*, explains the spiritual food and drink of I Cor. 10: 3-4 as follows: 'They were called spiritual because of the manna which came down from on high and the waters which flowed in a novel fashion from the rock. The fact that he calls that rock Christ is because the side of our Lord was torn open and there gushed forth from it blood and water-- blood for propitiation and for all peoples to drink' (Venice edn., 1836, p. 68).
12. M. Albert, *Jacques de Saroug, Homelies contre les Juifs* (Patrologia Orientalis 38) I, line 65; cf. also my 'Baptismal Themes in the Writings of Jacob of Serugh', in *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 205 (1978), pp. 325-47.
13. Bedjan, I. 162.
14. Ordo attributed to Timothy of Alexandria, §§ 35-6 (edition and translation in *Le Museon* 83 (1970), p. 386).
15. Bedjan, II. 589; cf. III. 299 quoted above. For the theme of Church as Bride, see also R. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, ch. II.
16. This helps to account for the hostility to marriage in the early Syriac Church (still very much alive in the *Acts of Thomas*).
17. Bedjan III. 213.
18. These are taken up by Jacob in a homily on Rebecca at the well (French translation in *L'Orient Syrien* 3 (1958), pp. 324-6).
19. Bedjan, II. 287-8.
20. Bedjan, III. 290-1, full translation in chapter 8, below.
21. Studied by H. Engberding, 'Die Kirche als Braut in der ostsyrischen Liturgie', *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 3 (1937), pp. 5-44, and F. Graffin, 'Recherches sur le theme de l'Eglise-Epouse dans les liturgies et la litterature patristique de langue syriaque' *L'Orient Syrien* 3 (1958), pp. 317-36.
22. *Breviarium iuxta Ritum Syrorum Orientalium*, III. 330.
23. A. de Halleux, *Philoxene de Mabbog, Lettre aux moines de Senoun* (C. S. C. O. 231, Scr. Syri 98), p. 6.

24. The Old Testament resonances include Gen. 49 : 11-12 and Isaiah 63: 1-2.
25. Bedjan, II 680-1. Exactly the same theme is to be found in an anonymous homily on the Effusion of the Holy Spirit (French translation in *L'Orient Syrien* 6 (1961), p. 161).
26. III. 55; likewise in the Syrian Orthodox *Fanqitho* fo Pentecost (VI. 216).
27. See R. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, ch. III.
28. G. Bickell, ' Die Gedichte des Cyrillonas', *Z. D. M. G.* 27 (1873), p. 581 (French translation of the whole poem in *L'Orient Syrien* 10 (1965).
29. For Mary-Eve typology in the Syriac Fathers see R. Murray, 'Mary the Second Eve in the early Syriac Fathers', *ECR* 3 (1971), pp. 372-84, and my 'Mary in Syriac Tradition' *Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, 1977).
30. Marian homily in Bedjan, *S. Martyrii qui et Sahdona quae supersunt* (Paris-Leipzig 1902), p. 703. 'New well' is a title of Christ in Jacob's writings.
31. Cf. R. Murray, 'The Lance which re-opened Paradise, a mysterious reading in the early Syriac Fathers', *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 39 (1973), pp. 224-34, 491.
2. Bedjan, *S. Martyrii*, p. 637.
33. Armenian Hymn No. 49 (*Patrologia Orientalis* 30, p. 229).

JACOB OF SERUGH ON THE VEIL OF MOSES

The chief glory of Syriac literature lies in its religious poetry. While St Ephrem from the fourth century will always stand out as the towering genius, many other poets from subsequent centuries have also been acclaimed in Syriac tradition as masters in this art, and excerpts from their works to this day feature prominently in the liturgical books of the Church of the East, and of the Syrian Orthodox and Maronite Churches. Perhaps ranking next to Ephrem, but very different (and more discursive) in style, is the Syrian Orthodox poet Jacob of Serugh, an elder contemporary of the renowned Byzantine poet Romanos: both Jacob and Romanos in fact belong to Syria which, in the fourth to sixth centuries, proved to be one of the great creative centres of early Christian culture.

Singularly little is known of the life of Jacob.¹ He was evidently born at Curtam, a little village on the river Euphrates, around the time of the fateful Council of Chalcedon (451); he may have been educated at the famous Persian School in Edessa. Most of his life was spent as *chorepiskopos* in the Serugh area (between Edessa and the Euphrates), and eventually in 519 he was appointed bishop of Batnan da-Serugh (modern Seruj). He died two years later, in 521. The fact that he was appointed bishop just after the accession of the ardent Chalcedonian Justin I (518–27) has led some scholars to suppose that he was a supporter of the ‘two nature’ christological formula put forward at Chalcedon. The internal evidence of his own writings, however, makes it clear that he was among the *diakrinomenoi* or ‘hesitators’,² who objected to the final formula of the Council (in ‘two natures’), preferring instead the one that had stood in the draft, namely that the incarnate Christ is ‘one nature *out of* two’. It is also clear that Jacob’s gentle disposition found the acrimony of the theological debates of his time utterly distasteful, and in his writings he always prefers to give expression to theological truths in symbolic, rather than philosophical, terms.³ In this respect he follows preeminently in the tradition of St Ephrem. In both the Syrian Orthodox and the Maronite Church he is regarded as a saint and a doctor; his commemoration falls on 29 November.

Jacob was a prolific writer. Although there come down to us a number of fine prose sermons and a collection of letters, it is in the field of poetry that his real genius lay. He is reputed to have composed 763 verse homilies (*memre*), and of these over three hundred survive. The majority are on biblical topics, and roughly two thirds of the extant *memre* have been published, mostly by the industrious Lazarist father, Paul Bedjan. Very few, however, have been translated into European languages, and only a couple (on the Eucharist) into English.⁴

Jacob's approach to scripture, like that of Ephrem before him, is essentially typological, and one of the homilies which best gives expression to this highly creative and illuminating treatment of the biblical text is that on the veil which Moses had to place over his face after the Theophany on Mount Sinai (Exodus 34 : 33-5), in order that the Israelites should not be dazzled by the radiance which his countenance had taken on.⁵ Because the understanding of the Israelites was not sufficiently mature to receive the full truth of God's message to them through the prophets, a similar veil was laid upon the words of prophecy. This veil is removed only with the advent of Christ, and it is only then that the true relevance of the words of the prophets can be properly understood : only then do the types and symbols, to be found in the most unexpected corners of the scriptures, spring to life and becoming meaningful.

In the translation (to which I append a minimum of annotation) the page numbers of Bedjan's edition of the Syriac text are given in the margin. The subtitles are added by me. Whereas Ephrem had employed couplets with seven syllables to each line for his *memre*,⁷ Jacob regularly employs the twelve syllable metre, where there is always a word break after the fourth and eighth syllable :⁸ for example, lines 85-6 :

<i>Abba kasya</i>	<i>mkar (h) wa kaltha</i>	<i>lihidayeh</i>
<i>wbanbiyutha</i>	<i>msakkel (h) wa lah</i>	<i>razana`it</i>
' The Hidden Father	betrothed a bride	to his Only-Begotten
and in prophecy	instructed her	in a symbolic way '.

HOMILY 79 : CONCERNING THE VEIL ON MOSES' FACE

The question is posed

One day a man of discernment enquired of me
what was the symbolic meaning of the veil upon Moses' face :

' Why and for what reason did that great prophet
cover his face so that the Hebrews should not look upon him ?

5 For what cause did the man who spoke with God
284 stand covered up like a spectacle amongst that great People?

Such is the question, why was a covering put on the face
of that source of prophecy in the presence of onlookers?

Explain the reason, if you know it, why

10 Moses was veiled, so that none could uncover his face '.

Come, o Grace, revealer of divine mysteries,
may this matter which the discerning have raised be spoken of with
your aid.

Come, speak through me, for of my own accord I am unable
to stir up my words in pursuit of expounding the truth.

15 Through you and by you, o Grace, may I be aroused to speak,
for through revelation you are bountiful in expounding :

come, o Grace and bring with you the discovery
of what was the reason for that Hebrew's veil.

It is right that love should now stand as mediary,

20 for without love, the hearer has no understanding.

The purpose of Moses' veil

This is what the veil on Moses' face symbolizes :
that the words of prophecy are veiled;
the Lord covered Moses' face for this reason,
that it might be a type for prophecy, which is also covered.

25 The Father kept the Son in concealment, without anyone knowing
and he wanted to reveal this matter to the world in symbolic terms;

285 he wished to speak about his beloved one through prophecy
and so covered Moses to make him a figure for prophecy,
so that, whenever a prophet arose on earth to speak, it might be
recognized

30 that his words were veiled from those who heard them,
that there was something hidden in the matter of which he spoke,
and his words to be understood, required an awareness of what
they symbolized.

Thus he cries out in the prophet, ' I have a secret, I have a secret ',
so that the world might be aware that the prophecy contained
secrets hidden in symbolic language :

35 the words and actions of prophecy are veiled,
it hides its contents in parables so that they might not be
recognized ;

it devises figures and utters its wonders as if in secret
so that the world might not become openly aware of the Son
of God.

If the people multiplied idols and filled the world with all kinds of
gods

40 without being aware that God had a Son,
how much more would they have done so had they been aware of
the hidden Son ;
this would have been an excuse for them to multiply idols on
earth !

The Father thus provided no such excuse for multiplying idols on
earth,

crying out instead, ' the Lord is one, the Lord is one '.

45 while his Son was announced in prophecy,
being spoken of in parables and figures.

The Spirit speaks through the prophets

Through the Spirit, in hidden and symbolic fashion,
286 the prophets brought news to the entire world of the Son in secret,
and the veil which was on Moses' face was spread
50 over their words whenever they spoke of the only-begotten.

The radiance of Moses was in fact Christ shining in him,
and he was veiled from the Hebrews so that they should not
behold Him,
for the Father knew that the People were not ready
to see the Son, and so with the veil he covered Him from them.

- 55 The prophets were God's friends and shared in his secrets,
and so he hinted to them in parables concerning his beloved one:
he covered Moses so that the world might recognize in that veil
the way and manner in which prophecy too is veiled.

- The whole Old Testament is veiled after the fashion of Moses;
60 in him all the prophetic books are depicted :
within that veil which lies over the scriptures
there sits resplendent Christ as judge.

All the prophets veiled every reference to him in their books
so that he might not be spoken of openly in the presence of
outsiders.

- 65 Moses was veiled, so which prophet will uncover His face ?
They looked upon Him, and they veiled their words :
they covered over their references to Him, spreading over the veil
as they spoke,
so as not to deviate from the example of great Moses.

Jesus, the light in the scriptures

- 387 Jesus is a radiant light in the scriptures, and so
70 a veil is thrown over him so that he might be hidden from the sight
of spectators.

That veil of Moses openly cries out to the entire world
that the words of scripture are likewise veiled :

Moses is the model of all that is uttered in prophecy,
providing a type for the veiled character of the Old Testament.

- 75 That veil was only removed with our Lord
in whom all secrets were explained to the entire world.
The Son of God came and uncovered Moses' face
that had been covered, with no one knowing what he was saying;
the New Testament entered and gave illumination to the Old,
80 and the whole world became aware of its words in their unveiled
form.

Our Lord shone out as sun in the world, and all received light :
symbols and figures and parables, all were explained.

The veil that was placed on the face of the scriptures was removed
and the world now sees openly the Son of God.

The Bride and the Bridegroom

- 85 The hidden Father betrothed a bride to his only-begotten,
having instructed her through prophecy in a symbolic way.

In his love he built a great palace for the bride of light
and depicted the bridegroom in various ways in her royal home.

288 Moses entered in and, like a skilled artist, delineated

90 the bridegroom and the bride, and then covered a great picture with
a veil.

He put in his writings that 'a man should leave his father and mother
and cleave to his wife so that the two of them might be one
completely'.

The prophet Moses introduced the account of the man and his wife
since through them Christ and his Church are spoken of.

95 With the exalted eye of Prophecy Moses saw Christ,
and how he and his Church would be one in the waters of baptism,
he saw him putting on her in the virgin womb
and her putting on him in the baptismal water :
bridegroom and bride are spiritually perfected as one.

100 and it was concerning them that Moses wrote 'the two shall be one'.
But he considered that the Jewish people were not capable of
grasping this great mystery,
and so he said it of man and wife that 'the two would be one'.

The veiled Moses saw Christ and called him 'man',
he saw the Church too, and called her 'woman' as a device:

105 to avoid speaking of the matter openly before the Hebrews
he covered up his words by various means, hiding them from
outsiders.

And so he painted a picture inside the chamber of the royal
bridegroom;

he called them 'man and woman', although he knew the truth,
that the one was Christ and the other the Church, both being veiled,

289 110 and he announced them as 'man and his wife' simply as a device.

And because there was that veil spread out,
no one knew what that great picture was or whom it depicted.

After the wedding feast Paul entered in and beheld
the veil lying there, he seized and removed it from the fair couple

115 Thus did he uncover and reveal to the entire world Christ and his
Church
whom the prophet Moses had depicted in his prophecy.

The apostle trembled and cried out 'how great is this mystery',
and began to show what the covered picture was :
'in those called "man and wife" in the prophetic writings

120 I recognize Christ and his Church, the two being one.

The veil on Moses' face has now been removed,
 let everyone come and behold the beauties that never weary;
 the great mystery that was veiled has now come out into the open.
 Let the wedding guests rejoice in the bridegroom and bride, so
 beautiful.

- 125 He gave himself to her, and was born of a destitute girl;
 he made her his own, and she is linked to him and rejoices with him.
 He came down to the depths and raised up the lowly maid to the
 height,
 for they are one, and where he is, there is she with him.

The great Paul, that great profundity among the apostles,
 290 130 expounded the mystery, which is now spoken of clearly.
 The great beauty that had been veiled has now come out into the
 open,
 and all the peoples of the world behold its luminosity.

The betrothed made the daughter of day to enter a new womb,
 and the testing waters of baptism were in labour and gave rebirth
 to her :

- 135 he rested in the water and invited her: she went down, clothed
 herself in him and ascended:
 in the Eucharist she received him, and so Moses' words, that the
 two shall be one, were established.

From the water comes the chaste and holy union
 of bride and bridegroom, united in spirit in baptism.

- Women are not joined to their husbands in the same way
 140 as the Church is joined with the Son of God.

What bridegroom died for his bride apart from our Lord ?

What bride sought out a slain man to be her husband ?

Who, from the world's beginning, ever gave his blood as the bride
 price ?

Apart from the crucified one, who sealed the marriage with his
 wounds ?

- 145 Who has ever seen a corpse placed in the midst of the wedding feast,
 with the bride embracing it, waiting to be comforted by it ?

At what wedding, apart from this, did they break
 the body of the bridegroom for the guests in place of other food ?

Wives are separated from their husbands by death ?

- 150 but this bride is joined to her beloved by death !

- 291 He died on the cross and gave his body to the bride made glorious,
 and she plucks and eats it every day at his table ;
 he opened up his side and mixed his cup with holy blood.
 he gave it her to drink that she might forget her many idols.

155 She anointed him with oil, she put him on in the water, she
consumed him in the Bread,
she drank him in the Wine, so that the world might know that
the two of them are one.

He died on the cross, but she does not exchange him for another ; she is full of love for his death, knowing that from it she has life.

Man and wife were the basis of this mystery,

160 they served as a picture and type and image for reality.

By means of them Moses uttered this great mystery,
covering up and preserving it under a veil so that it should not be
laid bare.

The great apostle uncovered its beauty and showed it to the world, and so Moses' words, 'the two shall be one', stood illumined.

The passover lamb, the type of Christ

165 Moses spoke of the Son of God in various ways,
but because they were veiled, none knew of what he was speaking;
he depicted Him in the lamb which he introduced as being bound,
to serve as a type
of the Son of God whom the People bound at the great judgement.
Moses slaughtered the lamb and sprinkled its blood on their doors

170 so that the angel of death might not enter to take their firstborn,
he dipped a sprig of hyssop in its blood and sprinkled the doors,
but no one save he knew what he was doing.

292 He sprinkled the lintels and doorposts in symbolic fashion,
sideways and up and down, so depicting

175 the cross on the doors, and preventing death from entering in.
at the same time hiding the mystery that the People might not be
aware.

This is clear, and just by groping a blind man would recognize it, for the blood of a lamb cannot ward off death :

had the slayer of the firstborn not seen there the depiction of God's Son,

180 he would not have passed by their doors.

It is Christ's blood that is spoken of in the blood of the lamb.

A great mystery is expounded in this small matter :

Moses has taught you, by the blood of the lamb that he sprinkled
on the doors,
that you should moisten your lips with the blood of the Son each
day.

185 For the mouth is man's gate which emits
both songs and words, both praise and abuse, of various kinds,
and David asked that there should stand a guard over it.

Who is it who stands guard for him who asks if not the crucified
one ?

· Set a guard, Lord, over my mouth', asked David.

190 It is the cross [or crucified one] who guards the gate of the mouth
from Satan;

the cross stood above the doors of the Israelites
and preserved them from the slayer of the firstborn on earth.

Do you now too take the blood of God's Son
and trace with your fingers the sign of the cross upon your lips;

293 195 make it the guardian of your mouth, and be confident in its sure
effect;

then the destroyer, on seeing it, will not draw near you.

If his symbol can stand at the door and guard them,
how much more can he himself guard the person who seeks him ?

Receive from Divinity's cup the blood on your lips

200 and it will prove a sure door-keeper for you.

The doors of the People were sealed with the blood of the lamb,
do you seal your door with the blood from the side of God's Son.

Dye your tongue, your lips, your mind too
in the blood of your Lord, and he will guard you from harm.

205 Seek each day for this guardian for your mouth and lips
earn him with tears, and he will preserve you unsleepingly.

The blood of the slain Christ is sprinkled on men's mouths:
Moses saw this, and depicted it in the blood of the lamb.

The crossing of the Red Sea and the wilderness journey

The scribes read in Moses' writings about his deeds,

210 and there was none capable of expounding these symbols:
beneath the veil they were kept from onlookers,
so that they might not be known until the epiphany of the only-
begotten.

Moses struck the sea with his rod, dividing it for the great People,
and by that wondrous crossing he depicted the cross.

215 Who has ever been able to divide the sea in two with a rod,
apart from Moses who bore the symbol of the Son of God ?

294 He rent the sea, and thus showed how the Son of God
would rend Sheol, and provide a passage for the dead who have
received life.

The Hebrews made their passage across, and the figure of that
great passage was portrayed

220 when the Son would lead men across to his begetter.

The Egyptians were drowned and were a type for the foul demons
whom the Son of God drowns in the depths.

He depicted Pharoah hardened like Leviathan
and made him a model of the devil whom he crushed by his
cross.

- 225 He went up from the sea leading the sheep, with the wolf dead,
thus signifying the Shepherd who brought his sheep from captivity.

Moses then gloriously depicted the bride of light
who sang praise, once delivered from persecutors :
the bands of young girls shouted out with their tambourines

- 230 thus delineating a picture for festal gatherings and their joyful
sounds.

He came to Mara, and a mystery held him back from drinking
the bad water, before it had been made sweet by the crucifixion:
the Lord showed him the wood and he cast it in the bad water
which at once became sweet, providing a parable of the Son of
God.

- 235 The cross made sweet those who were bitter :
it acted as leaven, mixing in them, thus restoring them.

- 295 At every stage and milepost that Moses passed
throughout his entire journey he depicted an image of God's Son.
At the seventy palms and twelve springs

- 240 he laid out the number of the apostles and disciples.

He threw down to the synagogue splendid bread from the clouds,
prefiguring that the food of life would descended to the world.

He struck the rock, and it gave forth streaming rivers,
depicting Christ who caused life to flow into the entire world—

- 245 for that rock was Christ, as it is written,
and through him and his symbol the Hebrews, all unawares,
received life.

He is the rock that was not hewn with hands,
and the rock that gave water to the People which was exhausted;
he is the rock which the builders rejected and refused to accept;

- 250 he is the rock that shattered the many idols of the land.

Moses spoke with the hard rock, and it gave him water,
designating by the rock Christ the Rock who came on earth.

The bronze serpent and other types

He set up an image of his crucifixion in the bronze serpent he
made,
with which he healed, once they had looked on it,

- 255 all those of his people who had been bitten by serpents,
restoring them to health after their snake bites.

He made the bronze serpent and set it on high in the camp,

- 296 and whoever had been bitten looked upon it and was healed.
He depicted Gologtha with the cross of the Son of God,
- 260 showing how his body gives healing to bodies that have been
wounded :
all who have been bitten by the serpent who slew Adam,
let each look on the cross, and it will heal him without medicines.
Who knew what Moses was performing then
by this prophetic action of his, hidden from spectators ?
- 265 He further depicted the Son with his perfect sacrifices and offerings,
with the whole burnt sacrifices that he offered up,
with the two sparrows, one of which he killed, the other he let
fly off,
and again with the calf that was slaughtered for purification,
with the bulls and the sheep, and the pigeons and doves,
- 270 with the bread of the presence that never left the table,
with the priestly garments and the girdle that was worn,
with the sacred crown and the ephod and precious stones,
with the girdle and golden bells around it,
with the fire and incense, and the censer, that the priest offered up,
- 275 with the stones ' perfect and luminous ' on the high priest's shoulders
that were to be seen in the holy of holies,
with the anointing of the high priest, at whose consecration
they intinct with blood his hand, foot and ear lobes.
- 297 In all the various sacrifices which Moses offered
- 280 he sprinkled blood for the wrongdoing of his people
to symbolize that it was by blood that He would make expiation
for the Hebrews,
so that the world might perceive that its Lord would make expiation
for the earth with his own blood.
He spoke in symbols, but did not provide their explanations,
for he was a stammerer, and not able to speak clearly.
- 285 It was for this reason that his stammer was kept,
so that all that he spoke might be kept unexplained.
Our Lord came and loosed the tongue of the stammering Moses,
so now all his words can be understood with clarity.
The stammer was removed from Moses' tongue,
- 290 and all his words became as clear as day.
Up till our Lord's time his speech was held back from being
explained,
and all the matters he spoke of remained obscure :
by these two things, the stammer and veil, was the hidden secret
preserved,
because the time had not yet come for it to be uttered.

The radiance on Moses' face

295 Moses asked to see the Father, since he had perceived
that after a time His Son would reveal Himself to the world;
the Father showed him the back of his face, to teach him
that the Son would be manifested in human guise.

The Eternal Being made himself a front and a back

300 so that Moses might know that the earth would behold his only-
begotten with human limbs.

298 The Father took on a back, and after a time his Son took on a body,
so that the world might be assured that the latter was child of
the former.

Moses gazed upon him, and the skin of his face shone,
for the brightness of the Son rested upon the personification of
prophecy.

305 This was the reason why the veil was required,
so that the Son of God might be veiled from onlookers.

It was he who spoke through Moses' mouth when he spoke,
for he is the Word who provides every word for prophecy:
without him there is no word, no revelation

310 in the prophets, for he is the treasure store of prophecy.
The brightness of the Father rested there on the face
of that Levite, but the people were not worthy to behold it:
with a veil, replete with symbols, was it covered up
from the sight of the Hebrews, those haters of prophecy's symbols.

315 Prophecy bore the Son on her face,
but, to preserve his honour, she was veiled from the discontented,
When the cross, the groom of prophecy, arrived,
it uncovered her face, so that her voice might be raised in the
synagogue.

The Virgin's Son removed the veil from the Hebrews

320 and now Moses stands revealed, clear and fluent in speech;
the doctor has arrived to loosen the stammerer's tongue,
Moses' words, that had formerly been halting, are now restored.

299 The stammerer is healed, just as Isaiah prophesied,
his words are loud, and all can understand what he says;

325 his tongue is loosened, and his face uncovered;
the mystery that had been hidden beneath the veil has come out
into the open.

The words of prophecy had all been like betrothed girls,
hidden by a veil from onlookers.

but now the groom has come and uncovered their faces, and
made them shine;

330 no longer do the betrothed require that veil.

The Bridegroom's pierced side : the overthrow of Sheol

The wedding takes place, and the bride enters the chamber :
 between her and the groom the veil is no longer required.
 The groom's side has been pierced, and from it the bridge has
 come out,
 fulfilling the type provided by Adam and Eve.

335 for from the first he knew and depicted
 Adam and Eve in the likeness of the image of his only-begotten :
 he slept on the cross as Adam had slept his deep sleep,
 his side was pierced and from it there came forth the daughter
 of light—

water and blood as an image of divine children

340 to be heirs to the Father who loves his only-begotten.
 Eve in prophecy is the mother of all that lives,
 and what, if not baptism, is the mother of life ?
 Adam's wife bore human bodies subject to death,
 but this virgin bears spiritual beings who live for ever.

300 345 Adam's side gave birth to a woman who gives birth to mortals,
 while our Lord's to the Church who gives birth to immortals.
 In the crucifixion he completed the types that had been depicted,
 and the hidden mystery that had been covered revealed itself.
 They crucified him on the high hill so that the gentiles of the
 earth might see him

350 and be healed by him of the bites from the foul demons ;
 they placed him like that serpent which Moses had raised up on
 high,
 and the symbol of the serpent, which had been hidden, was
 explained.

Our king cried out in high-walled Sheol
 which quaked and fell, like Jericho before the Hebrews.

355 The world learnt why it was not Moses but Joshua
 who brought them into the land of the Amorites to inherit it.
 It was the name of Joshua/Jesus which broke down the walls,
 and was a parable showing
 that Jesus' voice overthrew Sheol when he cried out there.
 All this that had been veiled he uncovered

360 at his crucifixion, and the earth, that had been in darkness,
 became light.

Prophecy and Virginity rejoice

That hidden child who did not loose the seals of virginity at
 his birth
 loosened the veil of prophecy at his crucifixion.

Joy of heart did he provide to both prophecy and virginity,
 for at his birth and at his crucifixion the two of them shone out:

- 365 for virginity he preserved intact, that she might not be laid bare,
while prophecy's face he uncovered, that she might not be veiled.
- 301 Since his birth did not tear that veil of virginity,
on his cross he tore off that covering from prophecy.
He preserved youth in the ranks of virginity.
- 370 while he lightened the burden that old age was carrying.
The young Mary continued on in her virginity,
while the aged Moses cast off the covering that proved heavy.
The virgin rejoiced that he had preserved the virginity,
the prophet too rejoiced that he had removed from him the veil.
- 375 He left virginity's beauty and preserved untouched,
He revealed prophecy's beauty that had been covered up.
Moses leaps with joy for he has revealed his beauty that he had
been veiled;
Mary exults for her virginity has not been harmed.
The girl and the aged man both have gained their true beauty
- 380 through the Son of God who himself is the beauty of all beautiful
things.
The great prophet bore him on his face beneath the veil.
Mary bore him within the gates of her virginity.
At his birth he left the seals unbroken,
at his crucifixion he removed the veils from the prophets.
- 385 He revealed their words, and the earth was illumined at their
revelation;
their symbols shone out and all now possess their explanation.
- The unnecessary lamp at midday*
The Hebrew people who read the Old Testament on sabbaths
still is not aware that the veil has been removed :
- 302 up to now the veil is still on their faces
- 390 and prophecy's beauty is hidden from them.
They read Moses, but Moses is hidden from the Hebrews,
and, without the cross, that veil is not removed.
As long as they feel hatred for the Son who was crucified on
Golgotha,
they are fittingly kept blind beneath the veil of Moses.
- 395 Their heart is darkened, being covered by that veil.
and they grope after the symbols and their explanations as if it was
night;
because their heart is not illumined by the sun of righteousness,
they do not understand how to read the prophets with clarity;
they do not examine the image of the Son that is to be found
in the scriptures,

- 400 for he is covered up from them with a veil so they do not see him.
 They slaughter the paschal lamb, and because it has this veil
 the poor wretches think that the lamb has rescued them from the
 Egyptians.
 They depict the cross of blood clearly on their doors,
 yet their eyes are veiled so that they fail to see who it is that they
 depict.
- 405 They burn the calf as a means of purification for the people,
 but fail to see in it all the colours of the cross.
 O Jew, remove the veil from your mind,
 and look upon Moses, on whose face Christ is depicted ;
 the eyes of your soul are deliberately closed,
- 303 410 and so you cannot see the beauties in a spiritual way.
 It is night for you and you do not perceive
 that the sun has risen from Golgotha, giving light to all creation.
 Up till the cross the entire world was as it were in night,
 though the law was like a torch in the dark
- 415 and the whole earth sought out the light of that land
 just as the eye searches out for a lamp in the dark.
 By day neither torch nor lamp are needed
 by the eye, since there is the sun which illuminates all.
 The Hebrew resembles the man who closes his door,
- 420 and, with his lamp lit, he is not aware that the sun is up;
 he does not open his door to see creation filled with light
 and to be illumined by the sun along with many others, without
 any need for a lamp;
 the windows of his soul are closed to understanding
 and so he looks for a small lamp in the middle of the day.
- 425 O Jew, the sun has risen out on the height,
 and the earth, sea, world and air filled with it;
 open your door and receive light from the day
 and put away your lamp which was only needed by night.
 Why are you become a laughing stock in the world that is filled
 with light,
- 430 you alone being far from the daylight, despite its being with you?
 The time for lamps and torches is at an end.
- 304 for the sun's rising has removed and put them all away.
 Moses' Lord has come into the world in bodily form,
 and, instead of Moses, it is he who informs the world,
- 435 While it was night the prophets set up a torch on earth
 to show the way by which the world might reach daylight,

But when the great sun of righteousness arrived
 he removed them from a service for which they were no longer
 fitted :

he had established them, not for daytime, but for the night,

440 and when night ended, he honoured them in their proper places.
 For daytime the sun is needed, with its strong light
 which drives darkness from every comer.

Moses is now honoured for his service.
 for the Son of God took the towel, ready to serve.

445 O Hebrew, put away your lamp that provides your light,
 for the daylight is spread over the mountains at his great
 epiphany.

The entire earth is filled with the light of the great sun.

Open your doors, let him enter in, and give you light and joy;
 that veil of Moses has been removed:

450 gaze upon him, and see how he stands, uncovered, as someone
 luminous,
 the man and his deeds depicting the Son of God.

Why is it you do not see the beauty that is clear as day?
 Remove that veil that is laid on your heart

305 and you will see the exalted beauties of prophecy.

455 Consider why that veil was required:

Moses took it to cover the symbols within it.

He who recognizes that prophecy is veiled
 also recognizes that it is uncovered in the Son of God—
 the hidden mystery which has revealed itself to the world in the flesh;

460 blessed is he who came and uncovered the prophets who had been
 veiled !

NOTES ON THE HOMILY

In the following brief annotations the numbers refer to the lines of
 the homily,

33 Isa. 24:16.

44 Deut. 6:4.

85 Bridal imagery is very prominent in Syriac liturgical tradition: cf.
 H. Engberding, 'Die Kirche als Braut in der ostsyrischen Liturgie',
 ' *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 3 (1937), pp. 5-48, and F. Graffin,
 ' Recherches sur le theme de l'eglise epouse', *L'Orient Syrien* 3
 (1958), pp. 317-36.

87 The theme of the ' palace ' and the ' bride of light ' is probably
 taken by Jacob from the *Acts of Thomas*.

91 Gen. 2:24.

- 96 For the various references to baptism in this and other homilies see my 'Baptismal themes in the writings of Jacob of Serugh', *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 205 (1978), pp. 325-47, and, for the wider Syriac background, my *The Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition* (Syrian Churches Series 9 [1979]).
- 117f Eph. 5:31-2.
- 134 'Testing', based on Judg. 7:1-7; for the earlier baptismal use of this passage see R. Murray, 'The exhortation to candidates for ascetical vows at baptism in the ancient Syriac Church', *New Testament Studies* 21 (1974/5), pp. 59-80.
- 152 'plucks', the imagery is of picking fruit in Paradise.
- 153 John 19:34. This verse is of central importance (alongside Christ's baptism) for Jacob's understanding of Christian baptism (see my 'Baptismal themes'); it also serves as the focal point for much early Syriac typological exegesis; cf. R. Murray, 'The lance which re-opened Paradise: a mysterious reading in the early Syriac Fathers' *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 39 (1973), pp. 224-34, 491, and my 'The Mysteries hidden in the side of Christ', *Sobornost* 7:6 (1978), pp. 462-72 (where several excerpts from the present homily are given), =chapter 7 above.
- 167 Exod. 12:3ff.
- 187 Ps. 141:3.
- 196 For 'destroyer' see Exod. 12:23.
- 206 cf. Ps. 121:4.
- 213 Exod. 14:16, 21.
- 229 Exod. 15:20.
- 231 Exod. 15:23ff.
- 239 Exod. 15:27.
- 241 Exod. 16:14.
- 243 Exod. 17:5ff.
- 245 I Cor. 10:4. For the symbolism see R. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom* (Cambridge 1975), pp. 205-38.
- 247 Dan. 2:34.
- 249 Mark 12:10, Acts 4:11.
- 250 e. g. Num. 25:1-5.
- 253 Num. 21:8, John 3:14.
- 267 Lev. 14:2-7. Jacob devotes a fine homily to this topic (French translation by F. Graffin in *L'Orient Syrien* 6 (1961), pp. 51-66.
- 268 Lev. 1.
- 270 Exod. 25:30.
- 271f Exod. 28.
- 275 Exod. 28:30 (Urim and Thummim).

278	Exod. 29:20.
284	Exod. 4:10.
295	Exod. 33:18f.
323	Is. 35:6.
333-4	John 19:34, Genesis 2:21f.
337	Gen. 2:21.
341	Gen. 3:20.
354	Josh. 6.
357	Syriac (like Greek) has the same form for both names.
397	Mal. 4:2.
444	John 13:4.

NOTES

1. The main study on Jacob is A. Voobus, *Handschriftliche Ueberlieferung der Memre-Dichtung des Ja'qob von Serug* (Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 334-5 [1973]). This has a very full bibliography.
2. On this point see especially T. Jansma, 'Encore le credo de Jacques de Saroug', *L'Orient Syrien* 10 (1965), pp. 75-88, 193-236, 331-70, 475--510.
3. The account of Jacob's Christology in Roberta Chesnut's *Three Monophysite Christologies* (Oxford 1976), pp. 133-41, fails to give proper appreciation to Jacob's symbolic approach.
4. Ey R. H. Connolly in *Downside Review* 27 (1908), pp. 278-87 and 29 (1910), pp. 260-70.
5. Syriac text in P. Bedjan, *H. miliae Selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis* iii (Paris-Leipzig 1907), pp. 283-305.
6. Although at first sight typological exegesis might appear to be in open conflict with the historicising approach to exegesis more familiar today, it should be stressed that the two approaches belong to different modes of reality and so are not mutually exclusive of one another—provided that neither side makes illegitimate claims that it alone is 'valid': cf. my 'The poet as theologian', *Sobornost* 7:4 (1977), pp. 244-5 (Chapter 6, above).
7. Most of Ephrem's poetic output, however, consists of *madrashe* or strophic poems.
8. A brief expose of Syriac poetic form can be found in my 'An introduction to Syriac studies' in J. H. Eaton (ed.), *Horizons in Semitic Studies* (Birmingham 1980), pp. 5-6.

DIALOGUE HYMNS OF THE SYRIAC CHURCHES

An ecclesiastical mime

W. A. Wigram, one of the members of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Mission to the Church of the East, has a remarkable description of an ecclesiastical mime that he witnessed, performed on Easter Monday :

(....) the boy to whom it has been given to 'act the Penitent Thief' for that year, storms the sanctuary *vi et armis*, and is driven back again and again by the blazing torches held by the deacons, who for the nonce represent the Cherubim that guarded Paradise with the flaming swords. At last the Penitent Thief secures the cross that lies always on a table at the entrance of the sanctuary—and which each worshipper kisses on entering the church—and comes forward brandishing that passport to bliss. Then the Deacon-angels receive him, and—seeing that souls are always borne by angels into Paradise, and also that no unordained man may set foot in the sanctuary, the boy is carried pick-a-back into the 'Altar-enclosure'.¹

The text which gave occasion to this mime (still performed even to this day in some village churches in Iraq) is a hymn consisting of a long dialogue between the Cherub and the Penitent Thief where the Thief, having arrived at the gate of Paradise in accordance with Christ's promise (Luke 23:43), seeks entry, only to be told by the Cherub on guard with his flaming sword (Gen. 3:24) that he has orders to admit no one (verse 20) :

Be off, my man, and don't argue, for my instructions are as follows : to guard, with the sword, from your race the Tree of Life which is here.

In the course of the lively argument the Thief finally persuades the Cherub to let him pass only when he produces the sign of the cross (verses 40—2) :

CHERUB Who brought you here, shedder of blood? Who has sent you, a murderer?

The sword is sharp, and if you continue so brazen its blade will blaze out against you.

THIEF Do not be perturbed, O soldier of the King, your authority is at an end, for such is your Lord's will.

I have brought you the cross as the sign : look and see if it is true, and do not be angry.

CHERUB At that cross of the Son which you have brought me
I dare not gaze ;
it is true and awesome: you shall not be prevented from entering
Eden, since such is his wish.²

This is certainly a hymn of considerable antiquity since it has been regularly sung during Holy Week in all three Syriac churches (the Syrian Orthodox, and the Maronite, as well as the Church of the East): in all probability it antedates the schisms brought about by the christological controversies of the fifth century. The hymn also happens to belong to a particular group of hymns of popular character whose structure exhibits certain recurrent features: after a few introductory verses the main body of the hymn consists of a dialogue, normally argumentative in character between two biblical characters (or personifications); at the end the argument is resolved and the last verse is normally some form of doxology. The verses are short and very often they incorporate an alphabetic acrostic.

Dialogues as contest poems

In a few of the dialogues between biblical characters (and in rather more where the participants are personifications) the argument takes the form of a precedence dispute or contest which takes place before a judge. A hymn on the Two Thieves crucified with Christ opens in this way :

There fell upon my ears the sound of the Two Thieves disputing on
Golgotha :
let us listen, my brothers, to what they are saying as they stand in this
wondrous judgement court.

Between them is our Lord's cross acting as the judge who cannot be
swayed :

like the scales of truth it weighed out their words as they put their cases.
Contest poems of this sort prove to have a long prehistory in the literature
of ancient Mesopotamia.³ Already in the hymns of St Ephrem, one of the
earliest of Syriac writers, there are several examples, such as the following :

I heard Death and Satan disputing
which was the mightier as far as mankind is concerned. [...]

DEATH Only the person who wants to listens to you, O Evil one,
but willy-nilly they all come to me.

SATAN You just employ tyrannical force, O Death,
but I have cunning snares and traps⁴.

But St Ephrem is simply following a pattern already well exemplified in still earlier Mesopotamian literature, where similar precedence disputes between two parties (normally personifications) survive in Middle Iranian, in Akkadian and in Sumerian. Clearly we are dealing with an essentially popular genre of literature which stretches right back to the very beginnings of literacy in the Middle East. Nor, within Syriac, does its popularity ever

wane, for examples are to be found right up to the present century. One such is a light-hearted dispute between a Kettle and Two Boys, written in Modern Syriac.⁵

No poem of this sort illustrates the continued popularity of the genre better than does the dispute of the Months, with its remarkable manuscript tradition. At the end of last century the orientalist Mark Lidzbarski published a Modern Syriac version of it, but it was only recently that the classical Syriac original has come to light, in two manuscripts widely separated in both time and origin. The earlier is an eighth-or ninth-century West Syrian collection of hymns, now in the British Library, while the other is an East Syrian hymnary in Cambridge, copied over a thousand years later, in 1882. The hymn itself was probably composed in the fifth or sixth century, though an earlier one on the same theme was evidently already known to St Ephrem in the fourth. The essentially popular character of this hymn (sung on Good Friday, according to the rubric in the older manuscript) can be seen from the opening two stanzas :

The months of the year gather together to present the beauty of their
produce;

the Year sits there as mistress, to hear the case between them.

REFRAIN Come and listen to what the months have to say
and give praise to their Creator.

Nisan enters and with a loud voice proclaims as follows :

‘The Year is not as proud of you, all you Months, as she is of me’.
Nisan (April) is followed by the other months of the year, and when the
winter months, December and January, turn up, all the others start abusing
them (verses 19-20) :

‘Barren and desolate months, what have you got to offer ?’

But they reply :

‘Come, listen and give ear : in us Mary’s Child appeared,
in the one he was born, in the other baptised [...]’.

Thus incidentally they provide evidence that this cannot be the same
dispute of the Months as the one alluded to by St Ephrem in the third of
his hymns on the Resurrection, since in his day the Nativity and Baptism
of Christ were still celebrated as a single feast.

The surfacing of a popular hymn of this sort in the Syriac liturgical
manuscripts is something of a rarity, and within the mainstream of Syriac
liturgical tradition disputations (where one party seeks to win a victory
over the other) have frequently been modified so as to become arguments
where reconciliation between the two sides replace victory of the one over
the other. Thus in one of four surviving dialogue hymns on the subject,
Body and Soul each blames the other for initiating sinful actions (verses 3-4)

Says the Soul : ‘I have never sinned or turned aside to evil deeds;
punish the Body, O Judge; don’t strike me, for I’ve done no wrong.’

Says the Body : ' You shall be beaten together with me, if Justice is
judging us,
for without you I'd not have done wrong. Why should I have the
stripes and you enjoy the Garden ?'

Eventually the judge (God) rebukes them for quarrelling and bids them
to be reconciled to each other (verse 46) :

Both of you, now, have acted together, and a single judgement is
reserved for you.

Join one another and do not be separated, for there is no division
between you.

The liturgical setting

Nearly forty of these dialogue hymns (Syriac *soghyatha*, singular *soghitha*) survive in liturgical manuscripts that I have examined so far. Seven are to be found in both East and West Syrian tradition (and for this reason they are likely to be the oldest), while the rest are handed down only in the one tradition or the other. An important group of this type of hymn belongs liturgically to Holy Week, when the hymns are sung at the Night Office. Thus in the Syrian Orthodox (and Maronite) tradition we have the following dialogue hymns :

Palm Sunday : Church and Sion; Church and Synagogue

Monday in Holy Week : Cain and Abel

Tuesday : Abraham and Isaac

Thursday : the Sinful Woman and Satan (Luke 7 : 36-50)

Friday (Ninth Hour) : the Two Thieves

Saturday : the Cherub and the Penitent Thief; Death and Satan.

In West Syrian (Syrian Orthodox and Maronite) tradition these hymns are included in the massive hymnaries arranged according to the liturgical year, known as the *Fenqitho* -- a term ironically derived from the Greek diminutive *Pinakidion*, ' little volume '. The full text is often only to be found in the earliest manuscripts (ninth to tenth centuries), since later scribes were all too apt to omit verses in an entirely haphazard fashion, resulting in some very odd sounding pieces of dialogue. An added hazard lay in the fact that from the eleventh century onwards it became common practice to copy out only alternate verses of hymns, since they were sung antiphonally by two half choirs. Provided the paired volumes were kept together, all was well. But once they became separated all sorts of confusions were liable to arise when their texts were copied, and as a result there are some dialogue hymns, such as those between Job and his Wife and Mary Magdalen and the Gardener,⁶ which survive today with only one half of the dialogue preserved. It is particularly sad that this situation has been perpetuated in print in the already limited number of this type of hymn that has been included in the printed editions of the *Fenqitho*. Thus in the edition printed at Pampakuda in Kerala (1962-3) the dialogue hymn

on the Church and the Synagogue, sung on Palm Sunday, provides only those verses where the Church speaks. Even worse is the fate of the fine hymn for Epiphany, where the participants are Christ and John the Baptist, for here we start off with just the verses where Christ speaks, and then suddenly towards the end we find ourselves provided with only the Baptist's verses. The result of this lamentable state of affairs is that the entire scenario, the betrothal of the Church to Christ the Bridegroom at the baptism in the Jordan, becomes badly obscured in its printed form in the *Fenqitho*.

Some Greek Parallels

The other place in the liturgical year, beside Holy Week, where several dialogue hymns occur is the Advent season (in Syriac tradition called 'the Annunciation'). Here are to be found dialogues between Zechariah and the Angel, Mary and the Angel, Mary and Joseph, Mary and the Magi. Of these, the second and fourth are certainly of great antiquity, being common to both East and West Syrian traditions, while the other two, confined to West Syrian tradition, are probably only slightly less old. The hymns with dialogues between Mary and the Angel and Mary and Joseph are of particular interest, since it is only for these two themes that analogous dialogues survive in Greek. Acrostic dialogues on both topics are to be found incorporated into two Greek homilies, Homily vi on the Virgin attributed to Proklos of Constantinople (d. 446) and one on the Annunciation attributed to Germanos of Constantinople (d. 730)⁷. Although very similar in form, there is no question of the Greek being a translation of the Syriac, or vice versa; the structure of the Greek and Syriac texts, however, is so similar that it is hardly conceivable that the idea of such a stylised kind of dialogue was reached independently in the two languages. If the homily attributed to Proklos were to be genuine, then it could well be the case that the Greek was the earlier: but although the latest editor of Proklos' homilies would indeed date this particular homily to the early fifth century⁸, other scholars have adduced good reasons for supposing that the homily is later than Proklos⁹, and such a dating would almost certainly cede chronological priority at least to the Syriac dialogue between Mary and the Angel. That the Greek dialogues are in fact inspired by Syriac models is also likely on more general considerations: whereas the genre is isolated in Greek hymnography, it is well attested in Syriac already in the fourth century, in St Ephrem's day.

In late antiquity Syria was a centre of creativity in a whole number of different fields—in art, architecture and liturgy, as well as in hymnography. It is a striking fact that most of the early Byzantine hymn writers, among whom Romanos of Homs is but the greatest, came from Syria or Palestine; many of these will have been bilingual in Syriac and Greek, and so been fully aware, without the need for translations, of the riches of Syriac hymnography. The full extent of the debt of Greek writers such as Romanos to the hymns of St Ephrem, and to Syriac hymnography in general,

still remains to be properly explored. But enough is already known of Romanos' sources of inspiration that we can be certain that these included several works in Syriac.¹⁰

The hymns as vehicles for theology

While appealing to popular taste in their outward form, the Syriac dialogue hymns often succeed in conveying something of the dilemmas posed by the paradox of the Christian message. Zechariah, confronted with the angel's announcement that his wife will produce a child in her old age, knows very well that such a thing is impossible since it conflicts with reason and scientific observation : aged women do not have children, and in any case his wife is barren. 'It would be astonishing if I were to believe you', he says in verse 16. 'in the matter of this tale you've told me : a tree already dried up cannot possibly provide fruit'. And it is all very well the angel telling him to look at the case of Abraham and Sarah : there were special circumstances there, and these, do not apply to Zechariah. It would be dishonest on his part if he were to say that he accepted the angel's message : 'The Lord knows what is hidden, and all thoughts are revealed before him : even if I should accept your words with my lips, my heart is still unwilling to listen to you' (verse 28). And two verses later he continues : 'However much you speak trying to persuade me, your words still do not touch my intellect'. The nearest that Zechariah can get is 'Would that my intellect consented, sir, and that my doubt was uprooted : for, while it is clear to me that the Lord is able, yet I find it hard to give credence to your words' (verse 32).

The Unrepentant Thief likewise bases his case on the clear evidence of outward appearances and on what can naturally be deduced from them : 'It is astounding on your part', he says to the Penitent Thief, 'that you do not see the flail marks all over his back, yet here you are proclaiming the man's glory. Who will believe what you are saying?' (verse 12).

Mary herself is also hesitant to go against the dictates of reason. She tells the angel (verse 22) : 'This meeting with you and your presence here is all very fine, if only the natural order of things did not stir me to have doubts at your arrival as to how there can be fruit in a virgin'. Though filled with awe at the angel's message, she admits (verse 24) 'I find it hard to believe, since nature itself can well convince me that virgins do not give birth'. It is only when the angel makes mention of the Holy Spirit that Mary finally accepts : 'In that case, O angel, I will not object : if the Holy Spirit shall come to me, I am his maidservant and he has authority. Let it be to me, sir, in accordance with your word (verse 36).

The Holy Spirit is here the source of the faith which is required in order to transcend the dictates of human reason. If the Penitent Thief is likewise able to look beyond the surface evidence, it is because he perceives the 'hidden power' in the man crucified alongside himself; and, in the case of the Sinful Woman, it is a faith born of love that allows her to push aside all the perfectly sensible arguments against her proposed visit to Jesus

in Simeon's house. These arguments are put to her by Satan who plays the part of one of her former lovers: 'If you listen to my advice, you won't go and disturb that gentleman : he's sitting with the nobility, and if he sees you he will be cross' (verse 13) ; ' You'll be an object of laughter to the whole world : he will not receive you as you'd like to suppose; he'll hold you in abhorrence for all you have done. You'll be a laughing stock when you return' (verse 17).

Whether or not these dialogue hymns are the outcome of what one scholar has called the Semitic principle of *Zweiheitsgesetz*¹¹, resulting in a counterpoint produced by stylised conflict situations, the dialogue poem is ideally suited for depicting, in popular form and by means of a series of different episodes, the state of disjunction between God and the created world effected by the Fall. It is equally well suited to depict the resolution of that state of conflict brought about by the descent of the Divinity into this creation, a descent that was initiated by a love that is utterly unexpected:

He who forgives sins came down to earth and put on a body from the
daughter of David :
compassion compelled him, and love forced him, so that, Lord of all,
he came to be born¹²,

It is because this divine love itself transcends the demands of reason that it needs, in turn, to be met by a love and faith which likewise transcend the dictates of reason and common sense. It is the total novelty of this resolution of the state of dislocation between God and creation which makes the form taken by that resolution so hard to accept. When Joseph, faced with his pregnant fiancée's claim that 'A man of fire came down to me : he gave me a greeting — and this took place,' he asks for some precedent for such an unlikely tale : ' Do you know of anyone like you, who resembles you, in what you claim ? No, to you alone this has happened because it simply isn't true'. All that Mary can reply is ' I do not have to be like anyone else, for my son has no fellow companion : he is unique, and so it is not possible for another conception like mine to take place '. Joseph retorts : ' So then something quite new in the world has started with you, or so you claim'; you have no proof at all, and there is no explanation to what you are saying '. The risks involved in this seemingly blind faith of Mary's are brought out by her own words a little later on : ' There will be a great uproar concerning me, [...] I shall be accounted an adulteress, and if my son does not look after me ' I'll be torn to pieces '.¹³

From contest to argument

The shift from contest poem to argumentative dialogue can indeed in a certain sense be seen as a conscious christianisation of the genre. In the contests proper from ancient Mesopotamia each party vaunts his own merits and at the same time points out the failings of his rival : victory is accorded to the most successful in this sparring match. In their Syriac form a number of different shifts in emphasis can be found. It may be that (1) the contest is preserved, but neither side wins, and the two parties

are either bidden to be reconciled to one another (thus in dialogues between Heaven and Earth¹⁴, Body and Soul), or both are defeated (thus with Death and Satan). Or (2) the contest is again preserved to some extent at least, but since it is between a known good and a known bad character, the conclusion is a foregone one (though it should be said that the bad characters are allowed to put up perfectly reasonable cases). To this category belong the dialogue hymns between Cain and Abel, the Two Thieves, the Church and Synagogue Sion, Cyril and Nestorius (in this last, being an East Syrian composition, it is of course Nestorius who wins)¹⁵. In some of these hymns, rather than vaunt its own virtues, each side is in fact trying — unsuccessfully — to win over the other to its own position. Finally, in a further stage of development (3) the idea of contest has entirely disappeared and been replaced by an argument in which one side is eventually won over to the other . This applies notably to the dialogue hymns involving the Angel and Mary, Mary and Joseph, John and Christ. What is interesting here is that the prerequisite for this 'conversion' is a submission to the arguments upheld by the faith of the other party against all the odds of external appearances. Only *after* the intellect has given way to the unlikely claims of faith is external verification provided that the faith is indeed grounded in reality. Thus Joseph eventually half concedes that there may be something in Mary's astonishing assertions concerning the origins of her pregnancy :

Weighty is the matter you speak of, and I am afraid at what you say.

The more you speak, the more I want to flee from you, being so distraught. Verification for Joseph then comes the next night. :

Joseph slept, and the angel arrived, revealing to him how the mystery
had taken place.

Joseph rose up early, knelt in worship, full of wonder, in front of Mary
who had not lied¹⁶.

By adopting and adapting a literary genre that carries perennial popular appeal the anonymous authors of these Syriac dialogue hymns hit upon an eminently successful vehicle for Christian teaching and instruction.

NOTES

1. W. A. Wigram, *The Assyrians-and their Neighbours* (London 1929), p. 198.
2. The Syriac text of this, and of most of the other hymns quoted in this article, can be found in a volume entitled *Soghyatha mgabyatha* (' Select dialogue poems ') edited by myself and published by the monastery of St Ephrem (Glane/Losser (Holland) (1982). For further details and bibliographical references see my ' Syriac dialogue poems : marginalia to a recent edition ' in *Le Museon* 97 (1984), 29-58. Here I simply give the verse numbers of the passages quoted.
3. The place of the Syriac contest poems within the setting of the literature of the ancient Near East has been excellently delineated by R. Murray in his ' The Syriac contest-poem and its connexions ', to appear in a much delayed number of the *Annual of the Leeds University Oriental Society*; see also his ' St Ephrem's Dialogue of Reason and Love, ' *Sobornost/ECR* 2:2 (1980), pp. 26-40. I have given a brief sketch of the topic in ' The dispute poem : from Sumer to Syriac ', *Bayn al-Nahrayn* 7 (28) (1979), pp. 417-26.

4. Nisibene Hymns 52, verses 1, 3 and 4.
5. Published with English translation by L. Yaure in *Journal of New Eastern Studies* 16 (1957), pp. 73-87.
6. This was the episode that gave birth to liturgical drama in the medieval West. The essentially static nature of these Syriac dialogue hymns precluded any similar evolution in the East.
7. *PG.* 65 740-1, 736-7, and *PG* 98. 322-32, 331-40. On the feast of the Annunciation there is a canon, variously attributed to Theophanes or John the Monk, in which a similar dialogue between Mary and the Angel occurs (ET. : *The Festal Menaion* [London 1969], pp. 448-57).
8. F.J. Leroy, *L'homiletique de Proclus de Constantinople* (Studi e Testi 247 [1967]), p. 292.
9. Notably M. Aubineau in *Revue des Etudes Grecques* 85 (1972), pp. 589-92.
10. See especially J. Grosdidier de Matons, *Romanos le melode et les origines de la poesie religieuse a Byzance* (Paris 1977), and his editions of the *kontakia* in *Sources chretiennes*. It should be recalled in this context that St Andrew of Crete originated from Damascus.
11. M. Lumenthal, quoted in H. R. Smid, *Protoevangelium Iacobi* (Assen 1965), p. 172.
12. 'The Sinful Woman and Satan', verse 1.
13. The verses of the hymn on Mary and Joseph quoted in this paragraph are 6, 23-5 and 40.
14. In prose (English) translation in *Le Museon* 91 (1978), pp. 261-70.
15. Not included in my 1982 collection (which was designed primarily for a Syrian Orthodox readership). There is a German translation in F. Feldmann, *Syrische Wechsellieder von Narsai* (Leipzig 1896), pp. 30-6, and one into French by F. Martin in *Journal Asiatique* ix. 15 (1900), pp. 515-25.
16. Mary and Joseph, verses 39, 42.

Spiritual writers of the Christian East are something of a law unto themselves; they often got into trouble with the ecclesiastical authorities of the day, and they had a delightfully disconcerting way of crossing the normal ecclesiastical boundaries. In the latter respect they thus become truly ecumenical figures—and perhaps none more so than St. Isaac of Nineveh (or St. Isaac the Syrian, as he is sometimes called).

St. Isaac is the outstanding representative of a whole group of mystical writers who blossomed forth in the Nestorian church in a wonderful way during the early centuries of Islam. These writers were heirs to an extremely rich tradition of spiritual writings in both Greek and Syriac, a heritage that they reshaped in their own particular way, and passed on, to the Sufi mystics on the one hand and, on the other, to later Byzantine spiritual writers, by way of the Greek translations of St. Isaac's writings.

Many of these Nestorian mystics came under suspicion of heresy, and some were openly condemned by the church authorities. Although the details are obscure, it would appear that the two features which disturbed the hierarchy were speculations associated with the name of Origen and so-called Mesallian tendencies. It so happens that these two elements, Origenist and Mesallian, very neatly point to the two main traditions of spirituality that St. Isaac and his fellow writers so successfully combined.

What, then, are these two traditions? The Origenist tradition is of Greek provenance, and is essentially rather intellectual and analytical in approach. It reached Syriac readers by way of translations of two writers in particular: Evagrius of Pontus (in the early fifth century) and the Pseudo-Dionysius (in the early sixth), this time in a very neoplatonic form. The former writer, Evagrius, was actually condemned by the Greek-speaking church at the Fifth Council in 553, and as a result most of his writings survive complete only in Syriac and Armenian, though a few—thanks to their false attribution to St. Nilus—still continued to exert a considerable influence on later Byzantine spiritual writers, such as St. Maximus the Confessor. The second writer, the mysterious 'Dionysius the Areopagite', was of course enormously influential on all subsequent streams of Christian spirituality, both Eastern and (even more so) Western.

The second tradition that St. Isaac inherited, the Mesallian, was very different in character: it was essentially a spirituality of experience, and it offers many analogies with the modern pentecostal tradition in its various forms. Like its modern counterpart, it was prone at times to extremes, and

as such was condemned under the name of Mesallianism (Mesallian means 'the praying people', Eucheite in Greek). But at its best this experiential tradition was something truly marvellous. Among its main representatives are St. Ephrem in the fourth century, writing in Syriac, the Book of Steps (*Liber Graduum*), an anonymous fifth century work, also in Syriac, and the so-called 'Macarian Homilies', probably a Syrian product of the same century but written in Greek (favourite reading of Charles Wesley amongst others).

St. Isaac quotes both Evagrius and Macarius by name, and at one point cites them side by side¹, perhaps deliberately intending to adduce the full weight of tradition by quoting the main figureheads of the two approaches, intellectualist and experiential. In any case, it is symbolic of the fusion of both streams of spirituality that characterizes Isaac's writings.

In what follows I shall concentrate on elements in Isaac that belong to the Macarian tradition, because they seem to be particularly interesting and important because of analogies with some of the modern literature produced by the charismatic renewal.

But first a word or two should be said about Isaac himself and his writings². Only the barest of facts are known about his person : his life falls within the second half of the seventh century, and he was born in the region of Qatar, on the Persian Gulf. He became a monk in one of the many monasteries of North Iraq, and between 660 and 680 he was consecrated Bishop of Nineveh (modern Mosul), a post he held for only five months, after which he retired as a hermit into the mountains of Huzistan (S. W. Iran), where he spent the rest of his days.

Isaac's literary output was considerable, and part of it is still unpublished³. The Syriac text of a large number of diverse short treatises was edited by the Lazarist Father Paul Bedjan in 1909, under the composite title *De Perfectione Religiosa*, and it is this volume that served as the basis for the well-known translation by A. J. Wensinck, published in 1923⁴.

Despite his Nestorian origin, Isaac's writings were translated into Greek in the ninth century at the monastery of St. Saba in Palestine, and herein lies a delightful irony that is worth mentioning : St. Saba's monastery had been the great seat of opposition to the Origenist monks of the sixth century, and now, by the translation of Isaac's works, the same monastery unconsciously effected the re-entry into Greek spirituality of the Origenist tradition represented by Evagrius, whom the Nestorian Isaac admires and frequently quotes (in slightly emasculated form, it must be admitted)⁵ as the 'greatest of the spiritual masters'. Isaac himself would certainly have appreciated this irony, for at one point he advocates 'prudence against reading books which accentuate the differences between the confessions, with the aim of causing schisms, thus providing the spirit of slander with a mighty weapon against the soul'⁶.

It is through the Greek translation (printed in Athens in 1770, and several times since) that extracts of St. Isaac reached the Philocalia, and many will be familiar with the long section of Isaac that is to be found in

The Early Fathers from the Philocalia, translated from the Russian edition of that work⁷. Here, then, is a writer who cut across all the ecclesiastical boundaries of the Christian East: a Nestorian who was read and appreciated just as much by the other orthodox traditions, Greek Chalcedonian and Syrian non-Chalcedonian.

Enough has been said by way of introduction, and it is time to let St. Isaac speak for himself.

Isaac was a solitary, writing for solitaires (he has some useful hints on how to get rid of unwanted guests),⁸ and his stress on solitude and separation from the world might at first make one think that he has little of interest to offer Christians today, living 'in the world'. In Syriac tradition however, the solitary is essentially the 'single-minded' person, who has set his mind on Christ alone⁹, and such a person can be found just as much in the city as in the desert. Moreover, Isaac defines 'the world' not so much as the non-monastic life, but as 'bodily behaviour and carnal thoughts'—that is to say the unspiritual life.¹⁰ Separation from the world, becoming a 'stranger' to it, as Isaac puts it, echoing here very ancient Syriac ascetic terminology, is thus a process of continuous *metanoia*, a total 'change of behaviour,' and attitude,¹¹ the awareness of which must be kept alive 'at every moment of the twenty four hours of the day'.¹² Looked at from another angle, this means the constant recollection of God: 'sit before his face all the time, thinking of him and recollecting him in your heart.'¹³

This continuous awareness of God's presence, the 'remembering' of the mighty works of his infinite care, is what gives rise to the sense of complete trust in God,¹⁴ a subject on which Isaac has a lot to say. Complete trust consists in 'compelling oneself to cast one's care on God in faith, thus exchanging one's own care for God's care',¹⁵ and this means down to the minutest detail of one's life. Isaac gives many examples of how God's care works in practice, often in a totally hidden way.¹⁶ This divine care, he emphasizes 'surrounds all men at all times: but it is not seen, save only by those who have purified themselves from sin and think of God perpetually. To such people his care is revealed clearly.'¹⁷ Isaac elsewhere stresses that this divine care is intensely personal, and is not just confined to 'acts of providence of a universal nature'.¹⁸

As a consequence of this divine care for each individual there can be 'no fortuitous events', nothing is the result of mere chance, 'for nothing fortuitous happens to man, good or evil. There is a Governor who governs the things of this world, there is a Guardian with each one of us, whom nothing escapes, and whose attention never fails'.¹⁹ Moreover, prayer—prayer that wells up from the uttermost depths of the heart—is able to bring about the transformation of those who are affected by a particular event. As Isaac points out at the end of this paragraph, the person who is aware of this mystery of complete trust in God, and acts accordingly, will necessarily appear a complete fool to the world.²⁰

Closely linked with this stress on complete trust is Isaac's awareness of the need to recover that childlike quality normally lost in the process of growing up : 'approach God with a childlike mind and walk before him' he says,²¹ for it is only those who 'know God as children' with whom divine inspiration can freely work.²²

Isaac is very emphatic—and rightly so—that spiritual knowledge is something completely different from intellectual knowledge. 'Don't ever imagine', he says, in a section that bears the exciting title 'This chapter is full of life,' 'don't ever imagine that spiritual knowledge can ever be gained by means of intellectual knowledge.'²³ Those who try out this path are doomed to failure from the start. This is certainly not a denial of the value of the intellect—provided it is used for the right things; nor does Isaac mean that an intellectual person *cannot* achieve spiritual knowledge, only that it is extra difficult for such a person to do so, in that, before approaching spiritual knowledge, he must first put aside, or 'deny', his intellectual knowledge with all its subtle intricacies, and recover 'childhood of spirit'.²⁴

Detachment from the world, the 'world' in Isaac's sense specified above is, conducive to 'flashes of intuition', as a result of which the soul can be raised to God 'and remain in ecstasy'²⁵ — a state of illumination that Isaac, with deliberate paradox, speaks of as in fact being the soul's 'natural state.'²⁶ Isaac has rather a lot to say about various states of ecstasy, and it is quite clear, despite the rarity of narrative in the first person, that he spoke from his own experience.

The first indication that the soul is approaching such a state is the gift of tears, and the opening of the eyes, by the action of grace, so that they begin 'to perceive things by essential (as opposed to physical) sight.'²⁷ Tears (of joy as well as of penitence) play an important part in many eastern Christian writers, and Isaac returns to that subject a number of times.

Various 'signs of grace' accompany such states, and it is worth quoting a few illustrative passages :

Sometimes a man will be on his knees at the time of prayer, his hands spread out or stretched towards heaven, his face looking to the cross, and, so to speak, his whole emotion and mind stretched out towards God in supplication; and while absorbed in these beseechings and pains at this time, of a sudden a fountain of delight will spring from his heart, his limbs will relax, his eyes be darkened, his face bow down and his deliberations be confused, so that even his knees are no longer able to lean on the earth, from the exulting joy of the sign of grace that spreads through his whole body.²⁸

Or,

Then, on account of the inner ardour, which is set in motion by wonder at the understanding of God's bounties, he will of a sudden raise up his voice and praise without being wearied, while the inner ardour gives place to thanksgivings also of the tongue; and so he will give

utterance to his feelings long and wonderfully. He who has experienced these things clearly ...will understand when I say that it occurs without variation, for it has been experienced many times²⁹

And again,

At once the face becomes flushed and full of joy, the body grows hot; fear and bashfulness are thrown away and it becomes as it were wanton; the power of concentration flees; impetuosity and disturbance reign.³⁰

In yet another passage we find,

When the diligent enjoy such special things, in their vigils they pass without dejection the whole space of the long hours of the night, while their soul exults and rejoices and forgets the coat of flesh, woven from the affections, with which it is clad. And on account of the delight and joy of their heart, they do not remember sleep; for they imagine themselves to have put off the body and to be already in the state which comes after the resurrection.³¹

Very frequently Isaac describes this state of ecstasy in terms of 'spiritual drunkenness.'

A fervent heat burns in the heart and unspeakable joy arises in the soul. Further sweet tears moisten the cheeks; spiritual exultation *makes the mind drunk*; inexplainable consolations are received by the soul; hope supports the heart and strengthens it. Then it is to him as if he dwelled in heaven.³²

Like all who have experienced such states, Isaac complains of the inadequacy of words for describing them.³³ Yet these things represent only the beginnings of spiritual knowledge,³⁴ and Isaac is not unnaturally much more reticent in his attempts to describe even more exalted states, which, in any case, he stresses, are extremely rare and experienced by 'perhaps only one man in a whole generation'. The states of fervour and exultation, however, such as those described in the extracts above, Isaac certainly considered to be frequent phenomena and attainable by all who seek them.

The 'seeking', however, is essential : such gifts do not just fall out of the sky. 'If you do not seek, you will not find', Isaac says bluntly.³⁵ And a prerequisite for such seeking is freedom from earthly care, which can only be brought about by complete trust, down to the smallest details of life, in God's care. Also required is a degree of abandonment of what may seem prudent : Isaac speaks of Christians who are still at the beginning of the road at their death, and comments that these are people who 'constantly wish to act prudently', and as a result never really begin.³⁶ A faith that God *will* act is also essential : 'as you have believed, so it will happen to you'. A further prerequisite is 'simplicity of heart',³⁷ for such experiences 'only happen to those who are simple of heart and fervent with hope'. And simplicity means the avoiding of what Isaac (following here St. Ephrem) calls 'investigation' or 'prying', that is, trying to analyse and explain one's experience of God in purely intellectual terms.

These signs of grace are given at all sorts of times. Isaac describes the example of a certain brother who was overcome by fervour in the middle of the office : he would suddenly leave the service, fall down on his face, rise up again and kiss the cross, repeating this 'so many times that I was not able to count them'.³⁸

Such 'signs of grace' could even come in sleep. In the following passage Isaac seems to be describing in the third person an experience he himself had :

Now I know one who even during his sleep was overwhelmed by ecstasy in God through the contemplation of something which he had read in the evening. And while his soul was amazed at this contemplative meditation, he perceived, as it were, that he had meditated for long in his sleep examining the ecstatic vision. It was in the depth of the night, and suddenly he awoke from his sleep, while his tears dropped as water and fell upon his breast: and his mouth was full of glorification and his heart meditated in contemplation for a long time, with a delight that did not come to an end. And through the many tears which were shed without measure, and through the stupefaction of his soul by which all the members of his body were relaxed, and of his heart in which the same delight was astir, he was not even able to accomplish his usual night service, except some psalm at break of dawn, so overwhelmed was he by the many tears, which, as a fountain, broke forth from his eyes spontaneously, as well as by the other spiritual things.³⁹

But it is primarily at times of prayer that such gifts are bestowed, at times when a person's entire being is consciously centred on God. Isaac compares such moments to the intensity of the congregation's expectancy at the invocation to the Holy Spirit in the Eucharist⁴⁰ : when a person has entirely left the world of self, and his whole emotion and mind are concentrated, using all his effort, on God : when his entire thought is absorbed in discourse with God and his heart is full of God—at such times the Holy Spirit imparts into the prayer 'unattainable insights', with the result that the mind is swallowed up in ecstasy, and the 'movement' of prayer actually ceases,⁴¹ as the soul receives the same sanctification as do the Bread and Wine at the Epiklesis.

This actually touches on a paradox that has long puzzled readers of Isaac : at the very height of prayer, prayer ceases to exist.⁴² This, however, is not a subject we can dwell on here, and in any case this is a state that 'only one man in 10,000 is found worthy of'.⁴³ What is worth dwelling on for a moment is Isaac's emphasis on the 'effort' of concentration—the *conscious* turning of the whole man to God, *body* as well as soul. At one point Isaac says 'every prayer in which the body does not participate, and by which the heart is not affected, is to be reckoned as an abortion, without a soul.'⁴⁴

The aim of prayer, according to Isaac, is 'to acquire love of God.'⁴⁵ This love turns out to be nothing other than the Tree of Life, which Adam lost at the Fall, and prayer is thus a constant striving towards the re-attainment of Paradise, while the Tree of Life is in fact Christ himself. In the following passage of great beauty St. Isaac describes the finding of this love as a continuous Eucharist :

When, however, we have found love, we eat the heavenly bread and we are sustained without labour and without weariness. Heavenly bread is that which has descended from heaven and which gives the world life; this is the food of angels. He that has found love eats Christ at all times and becomes immortal from thence onwards. For whoever eats of this bread shall not taste death in eternity. Blessed is he that has eaten from the bread of love which is Jesus. Whoever is fed with love is fed with Christ, who is the all-governing God. Witness is John who says : God is Love (1 John 4 : 16). Thus he who lives with love in this creation smells life from God. He breathes here the air of the resurrection. In this air the righteous will delight at the resurrection. Love is the kingdom of which our Lord spoke when symbolically he promised the disciples that they would eat in his kingdom : You shall eat and drink at the table of my kingdom (Luke 22 : 30). What should they eat, if not love ? Love is sufficient to feed man instead of food and drink. This is the wine that gladdens the heart of man. Blessed is he who has drunk from this wine. This is the wine from which the debauched have drunk and they became chaste, the sinners and they forgot the paths of stumbling, the drunk and they became fasters, the rich and they became desirous of poverty, the poor and they became rich in hope, the sick and they regained strength, the fools and they became wise.⁴⁶

One of the most important products of love is humility—'profound humility rising from the inner mind.'⁴⁷ Humility is 'the garment of divinity', precisely because it is the garment of the incarnate Godhead.⁴⁸ The truly humble will honour *all* men, making no distinction between rich and poor, sinners and righteous;⁴⁹ and welling out of this humility comes a burning compassion which extends to the whole of creation—man, birds, animals, even demons, in fact all that exists. The following is a very famous passage:

The heart that is enflamed like this embraces the entire creation—man, birds, animals, and even demons. At the recollection of them, and at the sight of them, such a man's eyes fill with tears that arise from the great compassion that presses on his heart. The heart grows tender and cannot endure to hear of or look upon any injury or even the smallest suffering inflicted upon anything in creation. For this reason such a man prays unceasingly with tears even for irrational animals and for the enemies of truth and for all who harm it, that they may be guarded and strengthened.⁵⁰

Another topic on which St. Isaac has much that is helpful is the reading of scripture. The scriptures are a bottomless source of 'incomprehensible

ecstasy and joy in God' for the soul which constantly meditates on them.⁵¹ Not surprisingly Isaac emphasizes that it is more important to recite one psalm from the heart than to run off reams of psalms in the monastic office without letting the sense sink in.

Here is his advice on how to read the Psalter :

Do you want to perform the recitation of the psalms during the office with delight, and take in the spiritual words that you are reciting ? Then abandon the idea of saying a specific quantity of psalms, or of setting yourself some goal. Say the words of the psalm as though it were a prayer. If the psalm is historical, then let your spirit consider that it is recounting some act of God's providence to yourself, so that the soul is awakened to wonder at God's care, and is then stirred to praise. Those passages which are prayers, pray them as though they were your own....At all costs avoid reciting the psalms as if you were just retailing the words of a stranger... You should not imagine that you are sedulously promoting the work of the apostles if you are wholly devoid of the passion and joy which belong in the words..... Rather you should say the psalms with real supplication, as if they were your very own words.⁵²

Dejection in reading scripture, says Isaac is simply caused by the mind's becoming distracted. Isaac is well aware that it is not always easy to achieve this, and in another passage he gives some advice on this point :

If you are tempted to start rushing ahead in order to get it over, go back to the beginning, and any verse that involves making a sign of the cross, repeat again and again. If you still cannot concentrate, then stop reading, kneel down in prayer and say : I do not want to count milestones, but to enter the marriage chamber: any path that takes me there will I travel on.⁵³

On the wider subject of temptations, and how to deal with them, St. Isaac has much wise and useful advice,⁵⁴ but we cannot embark on such a topic here. Enough, I hope, has been said to tempt readers to explore further the 'spiritual banquet' (to use his own phrase) that St. Isaac has spread out for our benefit.⁵⁵

At the outset it was mentioned that the type of spirituality described by St. Isaac has certain analogies with that of the charismatic renewal. This can be seen in particular in his expectancy of specific kinds of experience (which, however, are never to be sought for their own sake), and in his emphasis on complete trust in the care of God—a care that concerns itself even with the minutiae of day to day life; likewise in his emphasis on joy in reading the scriptures, and on constant thanksgiving. All these are insights that, while of course by no means confined to the charismatic renewal today, are being rediscovered by many who have become involved in it. It is in this sort of context that our seventh century hermit from Iraq still has a great deal to teach us.⁵⁶

NOTES

1. p. 333 (see note 4 for title).
2. There is a good article on Isaac of Nineveh in the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualite* (by E. Khalife-Hachem); cp. also J. B. Chabot, *De S. Isaaci Ninivitae vita scriptis et do trina* (Paris, 1892).
3. E. g 'Book of Grace', on which see the note by A. Voobus, "Eine neue Schrift von Ishaq von Ninive", in *Ostkirchliche Studien*, 21 (1971), pp. 309-12.
4. *Mystic Treatises by Isaac of Nineveh* (Verhandelingen der kon. Akademie van Wetenschappen te Amsterdam, Afd. Letterkunde Nieuwe reeks, XXIII 1; Amsterdam, 1923, reprinted Wiesbaden, 1969). All references are to this book, although the translations below have sometimes been adapted, since Wensinck's English is somewhat stilted.
5. See A. Guillaumont, *Les 'Kephalaia Gnostica' d'Evagre le Pontique et l'histoire de l'Origenisme chez les grecs et ches les syriens* (Patristica Sorbonensia 5; Paris, 1962), part II.
6. p. 34.
7. By E. Kadloubovsky and G. E. H. Palmer (London, 1954),. There s also a Latin translation (from the Greek), under the title *De contemptu mundi*, which was first printed at Barcelona in 1497.
8. p. 99.
9. See R. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom* (Cambridge, 1975), pp. 12-14
10. p. 17.
11. pp. 33, 13.
12. p. 337.
13. p. 50.
14. pp. 44-5.
15. p. 353; c . p. 278.
16. E.g. pp. 47, 67, 69.
17. pp. 44-5.
18. p. 45.
19. p. 119.
20. *ibid.*
21. p. 352.
22. p. 109.
23. p. 353.
24. *ibid.*
25. p. 14; cp. p. 95.
26. p. 15.
27. pp. 34-5.
28. pp. 40-1.
29. p. 72.
30. p. 148.
31. p. 369.
32. p. 372 (cp. pp. 41, 53, 117, 253, 305, 364.).
33. p. 41.
34. p. 226.
35. p. 41.

36. p. 65.
37. p. 66: compare Isaac's description of 'real faith', p. 252.
38. pp. 95-6.
39. p. 330.
40. p. 117.
41. p. 118.
42. pp. 112ff. cp . Khalife-Hachem, "La priere pure et la priere spirituelle selon Isaac de Ninive", in *Memorial Mgr G. Khouiri-Sarkis* (Louvain, 1969), pp. 157-73.
43. p. 174.
44. p. 98.
45. p. 294.
46. pp. 211-12.
47. p. 55.
48. p. 384.
49. pp. 38-9: cp. p. 54.
50. p. 341: the last word, 'strengthened', may be a corruption (or misprint) for 'forgiven' (almost identical in Syriac script).
51. p. 84.
52. pp. 256-7.
53. pp. 367-8.
54. See especially pp. 25, 199, 287, 324, 333, 338, 378.
55. p. 348.
56. In addition to the works mentioned earlier the following studies may prove helpful : F. C. Burkitt, "Isaac of Nineveh", *Journal of Theological Studies*, 26 (1925), pp. 81-6; G. L. Marriott, "Isaac of Nineveh and the writings of Macarius of Egypt", *Journal of Theological Studies*, 20 (1919), pp. 345-7; I. Hausherr, "Les Orientaux connaissent-ils les 'nuits' de saint Jean de la Croix?", *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, 12 (1946), pp. 1-46 (also his collected essays, *Hesychasme et priere* (Orientalia Christiana Analecta 176; Rome, 1966); K. Deppe, "Die *Logoi asketikoi* des Isaak von Nineve die griechische Übersetzung der Schriften Isaaks nach fünf Codices des Katharinen-klosters vom Sinai" in *Paul de Lagarde und die syrische Kirchengeschichte* (Gottingen, 1968), pp. 35-57 (gives concordance tables of chapters in the Greek and Syriac editions). See also chapters 11 and 12 below.

ST ISAAC OF NINEVEH : SOME NEWLY-DISCOVERED WORKS

Among the Syriac Fathers only two writers are reasonably well known outside specialist circles : the poet-theologian St. Ephrem of the fourth century,¹ and the influential monastic writer St. Isaac of Nineveh of the seventh century.² St. Isaac's works are accessible to the modern reader in two forms. First is the rather stilted English translation made by A. J. Wensinck, *Mystic Treatises by Isaac of Nineveh* (1923, reprinted 1969). Wensinck worked from the Syriac original which had been edited by Fr Paul Bedjan in 1909.³ Secondly there is an excellent new translation, *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, published by The Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Brookline (1984). This was made from the Greek text which had itself been translated from Syriac in the eighth or ninth century at the monastery of St Saba in Palestine.⁴

Apart from a different ordering of the chapters and the addition of some extraneous treatises by two other Syriac writers,⁵ the Greek text corresponds in extent to the Syriac text translated by Wensinck, that is to say, to pp. 1-581 of Bedjan's edition. This is entitled 'The First Half of the Works of Mar Isaac.' Bedjan went on to print some extracts (pp. 582-600) from a manuscript which he had seen in Urmiah (North-West Iran), containing 'The Second Half.'⁶ ; he further noted that a manuscript in Paris (syr. 298), whose beginning and end had been lost, also contained fragments of the same texts. Unfortunately the Urmiah manuscript, which was evidently complete, has never been seen again, and must now be presumed lost. No doubt this loss occurred in the course of the ugly events of 1918, when the Christian community in Urmiah had to flee the area. However the loss is happily no longer irreparable, for I was fortunate enough to discover another copy of this 'Second Half' of St Isaac's works. It was virtually on my doorstep in Oxford, at the Bodleian Library. Ironically, the manuscript had been lying there since 1898, eleven years prior to Bedjan's edition. It had been presented to the Bodleian Library by the Reverend Yaroo M. Neesan, himself from the Urmiah region.⁷

The Oxford manuscript (ms syr. e 7) probably belongs to the tenth or eleventh century and is almost complete. Only the opening letter is damaged in places. It contains forty-two separate texts, two of which are surprisingly repeated from the 'First Half' (corresponding to numbers 54 and 55 in Wensinck's translation). The four longest texts consist of 'Centuries', or collections of a hundred sayings, entitled 'Headings [*rishe*] on Knowledge', corresponding to the Greek *Kephalaia Gnostica* (the title of a work by Evagrius).⁸ The editor who assembled these works of St Isaac prefaced these *Kephalaia* with the following words :

Again, by the same Mar Isaac, bishop and solitary, separate headings concerning knowledge, containing exalted spiritual meanings and perfect knowledge, abundant and wonderful insights, and great mysteries, appropriate for the joy and delight of the soul and for its growth in things spiritual.

The remaining texts⁹ are on a great variety of different topics, as the following selection of chapter headings (sometimes given in abbreviated form) will indicate :

Letter on various kinds of stillness, On hidden prayer, On the birth of spiritual perception in the soul, On the spiritual meaning of the mystery of the Cross, On pure and undistracted prayer, On the preservation of hidden wakefulness in the soul, Whence continuous weeping is born, On interior humility, On the comfort provided by God's compassion to those who remain in stillness for the sake of God, On thanksgiving in times of trial, The spiritual understanding of the subject of Gehenna in so far as it is possible for grace to be granted to human nature to form opinions on the mysteries.

Incorporated into these texts are several very striking prayers, and one chapter indeed consists of a collection of thirty prayers.

Plans for editing and translating the new texts

The manuscript consists of 190 folios (380 pages), and so the edition and translation will be a sizeable and slow undertaking. Furthermore, in the edition account will need to be taken of other manuscripts containing texts belonging to this 'Second Half' of St Isaac's works, notably Paris syr. 298.¹⁰ The edition of the Syriac text will be undertaken by me in conjunction with Dr. Paolo Bettolo, who will be responsible for the four sets of *Kephalaia* (which take up ninety folios of the manuscript).¹¹ Translations into three different European languages are being prepared. The English translation will be undertaken by Dana Miller (in collaboration with me):¹² the French (for *Sources chrétiennes*) by Paolo Bettolo. The Italian will also be the work of Bettolo. The first fruits of the Italian translation, covering the four sets of *Kephalaia*, have already been published under the title *Isacco di Ninive. Discorsi Spirituali* (Edizioni Qiqāion : Comunità di Bose, 1985).¹³

A brief foretaste

The following selection of short extracts will give some idea of the character of the texts in this newly recovered 'Second Half' of St Isaac's work. References are to the folios of the Oxford manuscript.

1. From the opening letter (folio 2b - 3a)

When you seek for something but fail to find it close at hand, beware of losing faith, otherwise something which you are not seeking and of which you are unaware will be born within you, for lack of faith receives a punishment. Do not say 'I have laboured for so long, and failed to find, or that 'the reality of the matter does not correspond to the magnitude of,

the description.' Beware of thinking like this, for punishment is close at hand for such lack of faith, and a heart that has no faith stands condemned. In what does this punishment consist ? As a result of the sense of abandonment brought about by your lack of faith you will fall into giving up hope, and giving up hope will hand you over to despondency, while despondency will pass you on to slackness and slackness will keep you away from the object of your hope. No greater disaster than this can befall you.

2. *From the continuation of the opening letter (folio 17).*

When you pray, attach the following to your prayer :

O God, make me worthy to become aware of that hope which is reserved for the righteous at your Coming, when you come in our body to make known your glory to the worlds.

O God, who brought your love into the world when it knew you not, who were revealed to the righteous in divers manners throughout all generations by means of glimpses of revelation, resurrect the deadness of my senses so that I may become aware of you and so hasten to travel towards you, not pausing till the hour when death will impose a limit to my voyage, in the harbour of silence.

O Christ, the harbour of compassion, who revealed yourself in a sinful generation, for whom the righteous had waited in their own generations, who was revealed for the joy of all creation, grant to me other eyes, other hearing, another heart, so that, instead of the world, I may see, hear and perceive the things which you have kept for the race of Christians at a revelation of your glory as they benefit from a different kind of perception.

3. *From the fourth 'Century'*

(From No. 77, folio 102a). Someone who has actually tasted truth is not contentious for truth. Someone who is considered among men to be zealous for truth has not yet learnt what truth is really like : once he has truly learnt it, he will cease from zealousness on its behalf.

(From No. 78, folio 102b-103a). If zeal had been appropriate for putting humanity right, why did God the Word clothe himself in the body in order to bring the world back to his Father using gentleness and humility? And why was he stretched out on the cross for the sake of sinners, handing over his sacred body to suffering on behalf of the world ? I myself say that God did all this for no other reason, except to make known to the world the love that he has, his aim being that we, as a result of our greater love arising from an awareness of this, might be captivated by his love [or into love of him] when he provided the occasion of this manifestation of the kingdom of heaven's mighty power—which consists in love— by means of the death of his Son.

The whole purpose of our Lord's death was not to deliver [or redeem] us from sins, or for any other reason, but solely in order that the world might become aware of the love which God has for creation. Had all this astounding affair taken place solely for the purpose of forgiveness of sin,

it would have been sufficient to redeem us by some other means. What objection would there have been if he had done what he did by means of an ordinary death ? But he did not make his death at all an ordinary one—in order that you might realise the nature of this mystery. Rather, he tasted death in the cruel suffering of the cross. What need was there for the outrage done to him and the spitting ? Just death would have been sufficient for our redemption — and in particular *his* death, without any of these other things which took place.

What wisdom is God's! And how filled with life ! Now you can understand and realise why the coming of our Lord took place, with all the events that followed it, even to the extent of his telling the purpose quite clearly out of his own holy mouth : 'to such an extent did God love the world that he gave his only-begotten Son' — referring to the incarnation and the renewal he brought about.

(From No. 79, folio 104a). The reasons for the coming into existence of the world and for the advent of Christ are one and the same : an indication to the world of the immense love of God, who brought about both events.

4. *From a section on 'our weighty task, consisting in stillness' (folio 111)*

Apart from the illumination which is born in the soul as a result of them, what profit is there in laws and rules, but for the fact that every time someone goes astray in darkness he can be put on his way by their means: that is, by means of appointed times of prayer and the fixed Office. One can compare it to the case of someone who has lost his way and then gone back to his starting point : he starts out again, and arrives at where he wants to go. Rules and laws similarly put right someone who has gone astray in darkness : once such a person approaches them, they put him back on the path from which he had strayed.

5. *From a chapter entitled 'On confidence in God which is born of the knowledge of the truth and true faith' (folio 124a).*

A person who is afraid of sin will not be afraid of Satan. Everyone who longs for God's gift will have no fear of trials. Anyone who firmly believes that the Creator's providence controls the entire creation will not be frightened by anything.

6. *From a chapter entitled 'Topics on prayer and outward posture during it' (folio 139b).*

It is in proportion to the honour which someone shows to God during the time of prayer in his person, both with the body and with the mind, that the door to assistance will be opened for him, leading to the purifying of the impulses and to illumination in prayer.

Someone who shows a reverential posture during prayer, by stretching out his hands to heaven as he stands chastely, or by falling on his face to the ground, will be accounted worthy of much grace from on high as a result of these lowly actions.¹⁴

NOTES

1. A general presentation of this great author can be found in my *The Luminous Eye : The Spiritual World Vision of St Ephrem* (Rome 1985).
2. For a brief introduction see ' St Isaac of Nineveh and Syriac spirituality ', *Sobornost* 7:2 (1975), pp. 79-89, (= Chapter 10 above).
3. There is now an Italian translation of the first six treatises by M. Gallo and P. Bettolo, *Isacco di Ninive. Discorsi Ascetici*, 1 (Rome 1984).
4. There is a fine introduction and in the notes good use is made of the Syriac (the scholar responsible was D. Miller). There is also a recent French translation from the Greek, by J. Touraille, *Isaac le Syrien: oeuvres spirituelles* (Paris 1981).
5. Letter 4 of the printed Greek edition is in fact a translation of Philoxenus of Mabbug's Letter to Patricius (Syriac text with French translation in *Patrologia Orientalis*-30), while treatises 2, 7, 43 and 80 are by John of Dalyatha (8th century).
6. Bedjan also gives (pp. 601-28) an extract from what he calls the 'Third Part'. This is in fact a work by Dadisho of Qatar (7th century), which was later republished, with English translation by A. Mingana, *Early Christian Mystics* (Woodbrooke Studies 7 [1934], pp. 70-143). Bedjan further refers to a work entitled 'The Book of Grace', attributed to Isaac; this has not yet been published, but there is an important recent study by G. Bunge, 'Mar Isaak von Nineveh und sein Buch der Gnade', *Ostkirchliche Studien* 34 (1985), pp. 3-22. Fr Bunge accepts the Book of Grace as a late work of Isaac, whereas D. Miller, in his introduction to the new English translation (pp. lxxxi-lxxxv), suggests it may instead be by Isaac's contemporary Shem'on de-Taybutheh (Simeon the Graceful); some samples are translated on pp. 397-426.
7. Neesan worked with the Archbishop of Canterbury's Mission to the Church of the East at Urmiah from 1889 to 1915.
8. Bedjan gave some extracts from the fourth century, one of which (no. 78) was translated into Latin by I. Hausherr, 'Un precursor de la theorie scotiste sur la fin de l'Incarnation', *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 22 (1932), pp. 316-20, reprinted in his *Etudes de spiritualite orientale* (*Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 183 [1969]) pp. 1-5.
9. Of these the Treatise on the Cross was printed by Bedjan (pp. 589-600). and translated into Latin by J. van der Ploeg, 'Un traite nestorien du culte de la croix', *Le Museon* 56 (1943), pp. 115-27.
10. Also the very fragmentary Harvard syr 57; some texts from Part II are also to be found in Mingana syr. 86 and 601 (the latter incorporates several chapters among a collection of anonymous texts).
11. This edition is to appear in the Corpus of Oriental Christian Writers (Leuven).
12. I hope to include some excerpts on prayer in a collection of translations from the Syriac Fathers on the topic of prayer (in preparation).
13. The address of this publishing house is Comunita di Bose, 13050 Magnano (VC), Italy.
14. Some further details on these newly discovered texts by St Isaac can be found in my 'Lost — and refound: Part II of the works of St Isaac of Nineveh', forthcoming in *Studia Patristica* (Proceedings of the Ninth International Conference on Patristic Studies 1983).

ST ISAAC OF NINEVEH (ST ISAAC THE SYRIAN)

St Isaac the Syrian will be familiar to Orthodox readers primarily from the excerpts from his works incorporated into the Russian edition of the *Philocalia* and translated into English by E. Kadloubovsky and G. E. H. Palmer in *Early Fathers from the Philokalia* (London 1954) ; more-recently, however, an excellent new translation, made by Dana Miller from the Greek (itself an early translation from the Syriac original), has appeared, entitled *The Ascetical Homilies of St Isaac the Syrian, translated by the Holy Transfiguration Monastery* (Boston 1984).

A younger contemporary of St Cuthbert of Lindisfarne (died 687), St Isaac belongs to the other side of the Christian world of the time, for he was born in Qatar (now one of the Gulf States). At the time of his birth (the precise date of which is unknown) Qatar was still part of the Persian, or Sasanid, Empire, the home of the Church of the East, ; by the middle of the seventh century, however, the Persian Empire, along with the eastern provinces of the Byzantine Empire, had fallen to the Arabs. St Isaac thus lived in momentous times, even though no hint of these is to be found reflected in the few details we have concerning his life or in any of his extant writings.

The two short biographical accounts of Isaac's life stress his deep knowledge of the Bible and the writings of the Fathers, and this is indeed borne out by his extant writings which provide evidence for a very wide reading (including, for example, the life of the pagan philosopher Secundus the Silent). It is likely that he will have taught at a catechetical school in Qatar before he was consecrated bishop of Nineveh (on the east bank of the Tigris, opposite modern Mosul in north Iraq), a ceremony performed by the Patriarch George I (661-680/1). Isaac only remained bishop of Nineveh for a very short period, for after five months he resigned from the see, "for a reason which God knows", as one writer puts it. He retired to live the remainder of his life as a hermit in the mountains of Beth Huzaye (modern Khuzistan); he died, blind, at a great age in the monastery of Rabban Shabur.

It seems likely that St Isaac's extensive writings, in Syriac, on the spiritual life were the product of his old age. These come down to us in two parts, the first of which has had, thanks to its early translation into Greek, a far wider circulation than the second (which was only rediscovered very recently, in a manuscript in the Bodleian Library, Oxford). The first part consists of 82 chapters, of varying length, and most of these were

translated into Greek at the monastery of St Sabas in Palestine sometime in the late eighth or early ninth century. Once in Greek, further translations were made into other languages — Slavonic, Latin (and thence, in the late fifteenth century, into Spanish, Portuguese, Catalan, French and Italian), Rumanian, Russian, Modern Greek, and even (at the beginning of this century) into Japanese. The writings of this great monk of the Church of the East have thus successfully crossed many ecclesiastical boundaries, and it is remarkable that today they are proving far more influential in the Orthodox Church, the various western Churches, and the Coptic Orthodox Church, than in his own Church of the East.

A second part of St Isaac's writings was known at the beginning of this century to the editor of the Syriac text of part one, Father Paul Bedjan, and a few excerpts from it were included at the end of his edition. The manuscript he used, however, was evidently destroyed in the first world war, and no other complete manuscript was thought to have survived. Fortunately another manuscript containing this second part had in fact been deposited in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, in 1898, eleven years before Bedjan's edition of the first part, but since this manuscript was not included in any printed catalogue, it had eluded notice — until I had the excitement of chancing upon it in 1983. Part two contains some forty texts, the longest of which consists of a set of four 'Centuries' on spiritual knowledge, and these have already been translated into Italian by Paolo Bettolo. As yet, only two discourses from this second part are available in English, included in my *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life* (Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo, 1987), chapter XII: a few excerpts from these will be found among the texts quoted below.

St Isaac of Nineveh was by no means an isolated phenomenon in the Church of the East; indeed, the sixth to ninth centuries AD saw a remarkable flowering of monastic spirituality within this Church, and many very fine writings have come down to us, several of which are available in English or French translation. These writers draw on both Greek and Syriac sources: among the former Evagrius of Pontus, the Macarian Homilies, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Abba Isaiah, Mark the Hermit, and the Sayings of the Desert Fathers, are particularly important, while among earlier Syriac writers Aphrahat and Ephrem from the fourth century, and (especially) John of Apamea, or John the Solitary, from the early fifth, are influential.

Before introducing some excerpts, a caveat is perhaps necessary: so radical is St Isaac's understanding of the Christian life that some have actually been repelled by his teaching; here, for example, is the reaction of a great English Syriac scholar expressed in his review of A. J. Wensinck's complete English translation of the first part of St Isaac's Syriac works (*Mystic Treatises by Isaac of Nineveh*, Amsterdam 1923):

I confess that I do not find Isaac of Nineveh inspiring. He represents the complete abandonment of the world, which handed over the Orient to Islam, to barbarism and to stagnation. And when we examine the

reasons for this renunciation, it appears to be very little but selfishness based on superstition. There is very little in Isaac of the practical wisdom of St Benedict, or the ardour of St Bernard, to say nothing of St Francis. [...] The defects of hermitism had already by Isaac's time been perceived in the West, and St Benedict's rule and personal influence had done much to turn monasticism into a bulwark of civilization. Isaac lived a century later, but he, like the East in general, was utterly untouched by St Benedict and his reforms, and we see in him a milestone on the melancholy road whereby the Orient lapsed from Christianity into an unprogressive, uninventive barbarism, in which not even philosophy continued to flourish.

In the following excerpts from the two parts of St Isaac's writings the focus of attention will be on his teaching on prayer — not on the higher stages of prayer, beyond 'pure' or 'spiritual prayer', where 'prayer is cut off' and merges into a state of wonder, but rather on the more down-to-earth aspects.

At the outset we should note that there are three themes which are recurrent throughout St Isaac's works : the centrality of love, stressing both God's unfathomable love for his creation, and the need to reciprocate that love; the need for profound humility ; and the need for a sense of meditative wonder. Thus it is no surprise to find that, for Isaac, the whole aim of prayer is to acquire love of God :

The purpose of prayer is for us to acquire love of God, for in prayer we are able to discover all sorts of reasons for loving God. Love of God proceeds from conversing with him; this conversation of prayer comes about through stillness, and stillness comes with the stripping away of the self. [Part I, ch. 63; *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer* p. 250]

And elsewhere Isaac exclaims 'Thirst for Jesus, so that he may inebriate you with his love (Part I, ch. 3; *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer*, p. 248). Prayer is thus a theophanic process of growing into God's love : by discovering the boundless extent of his love for us, we learn how to begin to respond with love. It is not possible to force oneself to love God : this can only come through openness to, and cooperation with, him in prayer. Emphasizing that love of God does not come through human effort Isaac says :

If someone should think or teach that it is through a vigilant observance of God's laws, or through one's own effort or struggle, that one can cause the love of God to be engraved on the soul, then that person does not know what he is talking about. Not even from the law which God gave concerning love (the First Commandment) can a person love God, for fear, not affection, comes of the Law. Until a person receives the Spirit of revelation [...] and he perceives within himself God's exalted attributes, he cannot draw nigh to love's glorious savour, Just as someone who has not drunk wine will not become inebriated by

hearing words spoken about wine, so the person who has not been accounted worthy to receive in his soul the sublime things of God cannot become inebriated with his love. (Part II, folio 151).

The essential prerequisite for 'the conversation of prayer' is a reverential attitude, one which shows due honour to God. This applies not only to the mind, but also to the body, for posture too is important :

It is in proportion to the honour which someone shows in his person to God during the time of prayer, both with his body and with the mind, that the door to assistance will be opened for him, leading to the purifying of the impulses and to illumination in prayer. Someone who shows a reverential posture during prayer, by stretching out his hands to heaven as he stands in modesty, or by falling on his face to the ground, will be accounted worthy of much grace from on high, as a result of these lowly actions.

Anyone who continuously adorns his prayer with such outward postures will swiftly and quickly be accounted worthy of the activity of the Holy Spirit, for the Lord is accounted great in his eyes, thanks to the honour he shows in the sacrifices which he presents before the Lord at those times which have been set apart for him by the law of the free will.

You should realize, my brethren, that in all our service God very much wants outward postures, specific kinds of honour, and visible forms of prayer — not for his own sake, but for our benefit. He himself is not profited by such things, nor does he lose anything when they are neglected; rather, they are for the sake of our feeble nature. Had such things not been requisite, he would not have adopted such postures for himself during his incarnation — thus speaking with us in the Holy Scriptures.

He cannot be dishonoured by anything, seeing that honour belongs to him by his very nature. But we, as a result of slovenly habits and various outward actions which lack reverence, acquire an attitude of mind that dishonours him. [Part II, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer*, pp. 275-6].

Isaac teaches that we should have rules for prayer, but these need to be good rules, and they should not be allowed to degenerate into bad ones. Good rules are flexible, whereas bad ones are rigid :

The rule of liberty consists in one's unfailing observance of the seven Offices, ordained for our chaste mode of life by the holy Church at the hands of the Fathers who were assembled by the Holy Spirit for the ecumenical synod [the Council of Nicaea]. [...] This does not mean, however, that for each Office I should perform the same particular fixed number of psalms; nor does one fix a particular number of prayers to be said between these Offices, during both the night and day. And one does not set a time limit for each of these prayers, nor does one decide upon specific words to use. Rather, one spends as long on each prayer as grace provides the strength, asking whatever the pressing need of the moment may require, using whatever prayer one is stirred to use.

And while such a person prays he is all the more recollected and undistracted in view of the delight of this kind of prayer. (Part II, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer*, pp. 286-7)

Prayer needs to embrace both 'public' and private prayer : although St Isaac, as a hermit, would have been saying the Office on his own, he understands this nonetheless as partaking in the corporate worship of the Church and he is emphatic that neglect of this 'public' prayer of the Office will, especially in the case of a hermit, lead to pride :

The heart acquires greater freedom of speech with God during [private] prayer than it does during the Office. But complete neglect of the Office causes pride, and it is out of pride that one falls away from God. You see, the very fact that someone forces himself to be subjected to a rule-when he is quite free in his way of life-keeps the soul humble, and offers no opportunity for the demon of pride to dangle before him some evil thought. By continually considering himself as insignificant and not capable of freedom, he humbles and brings low any haughtiness of thought. There is no more effective bridle than this to place in the mouth of the mind that exalts itself. [Part II, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer*, p. 279]

As far as reciting the Office is concerned, a bad rule is one which imposes rigidity of practice : I must say so many psalms, I must keep to the exact words, and so on. A good rule, by contrast, allows freedom, for in prayer, as in other things, it is quality, not quantity, which counts. A good rule will thus allow prayer to 'take off' at any point (as we shall see, St Isaac sometimes speaks of 'good distractions'). By way of example, St Isaac contrasts good and bad ways of saying the Lord's Prayer :

If someone says that we should recite the prayer uttered by our Saviour in all our prayers using the same wording or keeping the exact order of the words, rather than their sense, such a person is very deficient in his understanding of our Saviour's purpose in uttering this prayer, nor has he ever drawn close to the thinking of the blessed interpreter, [Theodore of Mopsuestia's commentary on the Lord's Prayer]. Our Lord did not teach us a particular sequence of words here; rather, the teaching he provided in this prayer consists in showing us what we should be focussing our minds on during the entire course of this life. It was the sense that he gave us, and not the precise sequence of words to be recited by our lips. Thus, whenever we set this prayer before our minds as something to aim at, we will pray following its sense, and we will direct the movements of our own prayer in accordance with it, as we ask for the Kingdom and righteousness [Matt. 6: 33], or, as may sometimes be the case, for escape from temptations; and at times we may be asking for the needs of our human nature, that is for sustenance for the day; likewise with all the other things, in accordance with the aims with which he provided us, telling us what we should pray for. So our prayer should be

inspired by its sense, and we should conduct ourselves in strict accordance with it as we pray this prayer that our Lord taught us. [Part II, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer*, pp. 287-8]

In making requests to God in one's private prayer it is essential, St Isaac says, to ask wisely—not only for one's own sake, but also out of respect for God :

Do not be foolish in the requests you make to God, otherwise you will insult God through your ignorance. Act wisely in prayer, so that you may become worthy of glorious things. Ask for things that are honourable from him who will not hold back so that you may receive honour from him as a result of the wise choice your free will has made. [Isaac goes on to quote the examples of Solomon and Elisha, 1 Kings 3:9-14 and 2 Kings 2 : 9, and then continues]. On the other hand, a king's honour is diminished by the person who requests contemptible things from him. [...] When someone asks a human king for a load of manure, not only will he be despised as a result of his despicable request — seeing that he has accused himself by means of his own ignorance—but he has also offered an insult to the king by means of his stupid request. Exactly the same applies when someone asks God for the things of the body in prayer.

For more meditative prayer St Isaac has the following practical advice :

You should not wait until you are cleansed of wandering thoughts before you desire to pray : such distraction is not banished from the mind except by assiduous prayer entailing much labour. If you only begin on prayer when you see that your mind has become perfect and exalted above all recollection of the world, then you will never pray. [Part II, Century IV, 34, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer*, p. 264]

Elsewhere he explains how distraction, or 'wandering', can sometimes be good, rather than always bad :

Wandering is good when the mind wanders on God during the entire extent of a person's prayer, wandering on his glory and majesty, stemming from a recollection of the Scriptures, from an understanding of the divine utterances and holy words of the Spirit. In the case of someone who struggles to tie down his thought from wandering on such things, or his mind from wandering on its own accord on them during prayer, he is of unparalleled stupidity if he thinks that this kind of wandering is alien to, and outside the limits of, pure prayer. [Part II, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer*, p. 294-5].

'Good wandering' induces a state of wonder and praise — and to praise God is to fulfil the original purpose of our creation, seeing that praise belongs to our natural, that is to say, pre-fallen, state :

The soul which is constantly engaged in divine praise stands firm in its natural created state : it was on account of this state [i. e. of praise] that God brought the created world into being, so that the soul

might recognize and glorify him [...] and so be raised up to delight in his eternal glory. For the glory of the divine nature is revealed to the soul through constant engagement in the praise of God. [Part II, folio 19].

It is interesting to note how very close St Isaac is here to the thought of St Ephrem :

While I live may I give praise, and not be as though I had no existence. May I give praise during my lifetime, and not be as a dead person amongst the living: for he who stands idle [from praise] is doubly dead; the earth that fails to produce, defrauds him who tills it. [*Nisibene Hymns* 50:1].

It is by means of this engagement in praise that it begins to become possible to see creation as it were through God's eyes :

Purity of heart, concerning which the Fathers diligently exhort, is not a matter of someone being totally without thought or reflection or movement, but rather it consists in the heart being purified of all evil, and in gazing favourable on everything, and considering it from God's point of view. [Part II, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer*, pp. 293-4].

Furthermore, love of God necessarily implies love of others :

Someone who does not love his neighbour, and says that he loves God, has entirely gone astray in himself without being aware of it. [Part II, folio 15].

'Love sinners but reject their works'; 'remember that you too share in the stink of Adam and that you too are clothed in his sickness'. Later in the same chapter Isaac goes on to give instructions on how to behave towards others :

When you meet your neighbour, compel yourself to pay him more honour than may be his due : kiss his hand and his foot; make your heart fervent with a holy love for him; grasp his hands time and time again, placing them on your eyes and caressing them with great honour. Attribute to his person all sorts of virtues, even if they may not apply to him. And when he is absent, speak good and noble things of him. Address him in respectful terms. In this sort of way, not only will you impel him to desire these virtues (since he will be ashamed of the undeserved reputation with which you credit him) and sow in him the seed of good deeds, but you will also find that, by habituating yourself in this way, you will establish in yourself gentle and humble manners, and you will be freed from many tiresome struggles, against the likes of which others have to guard themselves by constant labours. This should be your attitude towards everyone. But when you get angry with someone, and you reprimand him or rebuke him out of zeal for the faith or having been provoked by his evil actions, it is precisely at that point that you should beware of your own self : we all have the just Judge in heaven. If, on the other hand, out of compassion, you

seek to turn that person to the truth, then you will actually suffer on his behalf. You will speak just a word or two to him in tears and love; you will not flare up at him, but you will banish from your countenance any sign of hostility. Love does not know how to get angry or indignant, it does not reprimand in a hurtful way. The sign of the presence of real love and knowledge is a profound humility issuing from the inner mind. [Part I, ch. 5].

What Isaac has in mind here is that one should see everything and everyone for their potentiality. One's fellow human beings, created in God's image, need to be seen with God's own love for them, however pained that love may be when the image is corrupted. This means that one should not see others primarily as good or bad; rather, one should always look upon them from this standpoint of 'profound humility', which means without judgement. Such an attitude has two practical results for St Isaac : first, one sees others, even great sinners, as better than oneself; and secondly, one is not filled with misplaced zeal for God, aimed at sinners. The ability to see creation through God's eyes requires interior stillness, which is something that is incompatible with zeal :

Do not be a reprover or a corrector of anyone, and do not be zealous and inwardly disturbed. Someone whose mind is continually moved with zeal cannot be found worthy of the spiritual peace in which is to be found an understanding of God's goodness. For zeal surfaces in someone as a result of the mind being left to wander about among everyone's deeds, like a ship without a pilot. Someone who muses about, and becomes zealous over the evil deeds of others cannot be dead to the world. There are two ways by which a person constantly becomes filled with zeal concerning other people's lives : this results either from pride or from folly. [...] Either it is because in his own eyes his faults are less than those of everyone else — or he may think he has none at all — and so he is competent to lead everyone else to the truth. Or else, he imagines he is a friend of God when he hates sinners — an utterly foolish idea, and one totally alien to any real knowledge of God. Such a person does not know that saints have endured all forms of death on behalf of criminals and murderers in order to bring them to the path of God by means of love. Those who are cognizant of the mind of God, and are vouchsafed fully to know his will, die for the sake of sinners, following the example of the Son of God. [Part II, folio 15].

To adopt a misguided attitude of zeal for God is in fact to abandon the example of Christ :

If zeal had been appropriate for putting humanity right, why did God the Word clothe himself in the body in order to bring the world back to his Father using gentleness and humility ? And why was he stretched out on the Cross for the sake of sinners, handing over his sacred body to suffering on behalf of the world ? I myself say that God

did all this for no other reason, except to make known to the world the love that he has, his aim being that we, as a result of our greater love arising from an awareness of this, might be captivated by his love when he provided the occasion of this manifestation of the kingdom of heaven's power — which consists in love— by means of the death of his Son. [Part II, Century IV. 78].

Isaac expands on this approach, and in the course of it he discloses his own understanding of the whole purpose of the Incarnation—a far remove from any 'penal' theory of the Atonement:

The whole purpose of our Lord's death was not to redeem us from sins, or for any other reason, but solely in order that the world might become aware of the love which God has for creation. Had all this astounding affair taken place solely for the purpose of forgiveness of sin, it would have been sufficient to redeem us by some other means. [Ibid].

Elsewhere Isaac explains that :

The true vision of Jesus Christ our Lord consists in our realizing the meaning of his incarnation for our sakes, and becoming inebriated with love of him as a result of the insights into the many wondrous elements contained in that vision. [Part II, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer*, p. 284].

St Isaac's description of what happens when this love is discovered provides us with a fitting conclusion :

When, however, we have found love, we eat the heavenly bread and we are sustained without labour and without weariness. Heavenly bread is that which has descended from heaven and which gives the world life: this is the food of angels. He that has found love eats Christ at all times and becomes immortal from thence onwards. For whoever eats of this bread shall not taste death in eternity. Blessed is the person who has eaten from the bread of love, which is Jesus. Whoever is fed with love is fed with Christ, who is the all—governing God. Witness is John who says, God is love [1 John 4 : 16]. Thus whoever lives with love in this creation smells life from God, breathing here the air of the resurrection. In this air the righteous will delight at the resurrection. Love is the kingdom of which our Lord spoke when symbolically he promised the disciples they would eat in his kingdom, You shall eat and drink at the table of my kingdom [Luke 22 : 30]. What should they eat, if not love ? Love is sufficient to feed mankind instead of food and drink. This is the wine that gladdens the heart of humanity [Psalm 104 : 15]. Blessed is the person who has drunk from this wine. This is the wine from which the debauched have drunk, and they became chaste; the sinners, and they forgot the paths of stumbling; the drunk, and they became fasters;

the rich, and they became desirous of poverty; the poor, and they became rich in hope; the sick, and they regained strength; the fools, and they became wise. [Part I, ch. 33].

FOR FURTHER READING

There are two complete translations into English of Part I of St Isaac's writings :

From the Syriac original : A. J. Wensinck, *Mystic Treatises by Isaac of Nineveh* (Amsterdam 1923; reprinted Wiesbaden 1969); the review quoted above was by F. C. Burkitt, in the *Journal of Theological Studies* 26 (1924/5). pp. 82-6.

From Greek : *The Ascetical Homilies of St Isaac the Syrian, translated by the Holy Transfiguration Monastery* (Boston 1984). - This also includes several homilies, both by Isaac and by other Syriac writers, translated from Syriac. Both introduction and translations are the work of Dana Miller.

The French translation by J. Touraille, *Isaac le Syrien. Oeuvres spirituelles* (Paris 1981), is also made from the Greek. It should be noted that the order of the chapters in the translations made from

Greek is different from that of the Syriac (and Wensinck's translation).

Selections can be found in the following :

- E. Kadloubovsky and G. E. H. Palmer, *Early Fathers from the Philokalia* (London 1954), pp. 183-280.
- S. P. Brock, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life* (Kalamazoo 1987), pp. 241-301 (including two discourses from the newly discovered Part II).
- A. M. Allchin, *The Heart of Compassion* (forthcoming in the series *Enfolded in Love*).

The Italian translation of the Centuries in Part II is by P. Bettolo, *Isacco di Ninive : Discorsi spirituali* (Magnano 1985); there is also a recent Italian translation of chapters 1-38 of Part I by M. Gallo and P. Bettolo, *Isacco di Ninive : Discorsi Ascetici* (Rome 1984).

An excellent introduction, by Dana Miller, will be found in *The Ascetical Homilies of St Isaac the Syrian*, pp. lxiii-cxii. Reference can also be made to the following :

- E. Khalife Hachem, Isaac de Ninive, in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualite* 7 (1971), cols 2041-54.
- S. P. Brock, St Isaac of Nineveh and Syriac spirituality, *Sobornost* 7:2 (1975), pp. 79-89 (-- chapter 10, above);
- St Isaac of Nineveh, *The Way* (Jan. 1981), pp. 68-74;
- Isaac of Nineveh : some newly discovered texts, *Sobornost/Eastern Churches Review* 8:1(1986), pp. 28-33 (-- chapter 11, above).

- C. N. Tsirpanlis, Praxis and theoria : the heart, love and light mysticism in Saint Isaac the Syrian, *The Patristic and Byzantine Review* 6 (1987), 93-120 (and reprinted in his *Greek Patristic Theology III* (New York 1987), pp. 43-70).

For Isaac's background and for other writers in the Syriac tradition the following may be consulted :

- G. Wakefield (ed). *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (London 1983), pp. 367-8.
- C. P. M. Jones, E. Yarnold, G. Wakefield (edd.), *The Study of Spirituality* (London 1986), pp. 199-215.
- R. Beulay, *La lumiere sans forme : introduction a l'etude de la mystique chretienne syro-orientale* (Chevctogne 1987).

English translations of some of these writings can be found in

A. Mingana, *Early Christian Mystics* (Woodbrooke Studies 1934).

For the history of the translations of the first part of St Isaac's works see J. Munitiz, A Greek Anima Christi prayer, *Eastern Churches Review* 6 : 2 (1974), pp. 170-80: and S. P. Brock St Isaac of Nineveh, *The Assyrian* (London) 3:6 (1986), pp. 8-9 (with chart).

THE SYRIAN CHURCHES SERIES

THE SYRIAN CHURCHES SERIES, started in May 1972 is meant to promote scholarly studies and research pertaining to the Syrian churches. It is also intended to reprint important studies in the area.

- Vol. I. **The Apostle Thomas in India according to the Acts of Thomas**,
by J. N. Farquhar (Manchester) and G. Garitte (Louvain),
with an introduction by Jacob Vellian — Rs. 15/-
- Vol. VI **Studies on Syrian Baptismal Rites : A Symposium**, by B. Botte
(Louvain) A. F. J. Klijn (Leiden), E. C. Ratcliff
(Cambridge), L. L. Mitchell (Notre Dame, In.), Sebastian
Brock (Cambridge) and others. Rs. 25/-
- Vol. VIII **The Romanization Tendency : Studies in Liturgies and Church
Institutions**, by Robert McNally (New York), Malak Hanna
(Rome), Johannes Madey (Paderborn), P. E. Gemayel
(Beyrouth), Gabriele Winkler (Oxford), Francisco Rivera
(Toledo), Michael Solovey (Ottawa) E. El. Hayek (Washington),
J. Vellian (Menlo Park, Cal.) and others, Introduction by
Aidan Kavanagh O. S. B. (Yale Univ.) Rs. 25/-
- Vol. IX **The Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition**,
by Sebastian Brock (Oxford) Rs. 20/-
- Vol. X **Deaconess in the Church — A pastoral need of day ?**
by Mar Kuriakose Kunnacherry — Rs. 7/-
- Vol. XI **Sogiatha : Syriac Dialogue Hymns**
by S. P. Brock — Rs. 10/-
- Vol. XII **A Symposium on Knanites : (A Syrian Christian group of
South India)** — Rs. 25/-
- Vol. XIII **Studies in Syriac Spirituality**
by S. P. Brock — Rs. 30/-

Available at

—Jyothi Book House, Kottayam – 686001, Kerala.

—Deepika Book Stall, Kottayam – 686001, Kerala.

—Begegnung mit den Kirchen des Orients, Bucherdienst Jahnplatz 6,
D-4790 Paderborn, West Germany.